

the third eye of shiva

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contents:

<i>the third eye of shiva.....</i>	<i>1</i>
<i>the plastification of gerald harrison.....</i>	<i>21</i>
<i>the arab</i>	<i>25</i>
<i>the poetry reading.....</i>	<i>33</i>
<i>the soul of lizzzie parker.....</i>	<i>39</i>
<i>fearsome techniques.....</i>	<i>55</i>
<i>tsunami.....</i>	<i>61</i>
<i>the death of zakron</i>	<i>65</i>
<i>the lost city.....</i>	<i>81</i>
<i>if only i'd remembered my stuzsicadente.....</i>	<i>89</i>
<i>the subjugation of the beast.....</i>	<i>95</i>
<i>the city of mirrors</i>	<i>101</i>
<i>they travel by night.....</i>	<i>111</i>
<i>the girl who saw too much.....</i>	<i>117</i>

the third eye of shiva

“*O* Mighty Arjuna, Light of the Pandavas, you among all men know best the dark power of the Koh-i-noor: the lust for power and beauty that spirals forever downwards into the infernal regions. The giving that famishes the craving. That delusory power of the Mountain of Light that utterly destroys those that look upon it with greed and covetousness in their eyes. Mighty Arjuna, let it be related to all men how Karna, son of Surya, was discovered by the poor daughter of an elephant keeper while she was playing on the banks of the sacred river, Yumana. How on his forehead the child bore the dazzling stone of light, and how its bright, bright rays bathed him in a shimmering halo of translucent light so that he, poor deluded fool, believed that it had conferred upon him the power of invincibility. Speak, noble Arjuna, of how the stone's evil powers of deceit twisted the mind of Karna (who had been raised up by your own great father to the position of royal prince) and made him betray the ones who had loved him dearly with the intention of replacing the old and beloved King of the Pandavas. O Arjuna, shout it loud for all to hear: how the civilized veracities of the several worlds hung in the cosmic balance until, with the help of

the divine Krishna, Karna was left dead in the dust of the battlefield. Whisper, mighty Arjuna, of how the evil of the Koh-i-noor survived: of how the great diamond was brought to the village of Thanesar by an unlettered woman. Tell them in soft breaths, of how the Mountain of Light was affixed in the middle of the forehead of the statue of the terrible god, Shiva (he whose function it is in the great cycle of life to utterly destroy all things). Relate it to the world with compassion, Arjuna, that the destructive evil of the Koh-i-noor survived, and in addition, was united with the powers of dissolution possessed by Shiva himself. Tell them with tears in your eyes how the Koh-i-noor has changed its location and its form through the ages: how, deeply disguised, it led to the deaths of five great Maharajahs of the north (Aryans all) and to the enslavement of India itself. Now I feel that great danger is at hand. Once again it has fallen into the hands of desperate men, foreigners, whose already primitive minds are being twisted and controlled by this monstrous evil. Arjuna, help your people! Krishna, beautiful boy-warrior, return and save us once again. Krishna. Krishna. I fear that the Koh-i-noor is about to realize its final destiny and release in undiluted form the terrible destructiveness of Shiva on all our heads. Save us, Arjuna. Save us, Krishna. Ohm. Ohm. Ohm.”

Captain Richardson had been back in England for more than a year before his mind began to seriously turn to crime as a viable career option. He had been in the Royal

the third eye of shiva

Marines since the age of eighteen, and soldiering was the only thing he knew: he was trained in the arduous but secretive combat techniques of the SAS and had seen action in hot spots all over the world, from Rwanda to Iraq. Unfortunately, not everything had gone to plan in his last operation. In the tropical jungles of Colombia's southern region he had taken a single wrong step - and bang! A hitherto unexploded mine had deprived him of his left leg. It hadn't taken them long to shift him on to civvies street. No compunction, and certainly not much of a pension. "Was that it?" he'd asked himself. Twenty-two years of service gone up in smoke, and not so much as a single heartfelt thank-you! Richardson's inner sensibilities had already begun to corrupt, and he succumbed to a deep bitterness. After six months his wife couldn't stand it anymore and left him for another man, a friend of his. Richardson recalled their last conversation with shame, disgust, and fury.

"David, you've changed so much. You've become bitter."

"What do you expect of a crippled SAS man, Lena? I'm about as useful as a priest who doesn't believe in God anymore."

"Other people suffer setbacks and tragedies in their life without the self pity that you've been demonstrating since you came home."

"You think that I'm filled with self pity? Perhaps I begin to disgust you with my one leg?"

"Your attitude disgusts me, David, and quite frankly, I've had enough."

“Oh yes?”

“Yes. I’m leaving you, David. I just can’t love you anymore, and Frank and I are going to try and start a new life together.”

“Then good luck to you both: a whore, and a traitor. Better get going now before I knock your teeth out. There’s nothing wrong with my fists, you know.”

And that had been that. His last loving relationship betrayed and reduced to nothingness just when he’d needed it most. Of course Richardson blamed Lena and Frank for what had happened. He did not consider for a moment that any blame attached to him. Everything was a result of other people’s weaknesses. Lena had wanted a whole lover, while Frank wasn’t able to resist the hunter’s urge to take easy pickings from his wounded friend. He’d probably have done the same thing himself if the positions had been reversed... And slowly, alone in his small house in Ealing, the little humanity that had survived his lengthy army service began to wither and die, until only something cold, hard and intractable remained in its place.

He’d started thinking about crime in general, and the Koh-i-noor diamond in particular. He’d read an article in a popular magazine about how the diamond had been acquired for Queen Victoria in the middle of the nineteenth century, later re-cut, and then set in the royal crown to represent her sovereignty over the Indian sub-continent. Now the crown, with the Koh-i-noor as its centerpiece, was on view to the general public with the other crown jewels in the basement vault below the Tower of London. Wouldn’t it be great, Richardson had thought, to get his hands on that

the third eye of shiva

diamond? The idea had continued to refine itself in the future weeks.

Strangely, it was a kind of bizarre *covetousness* that Richardson found himself feeling towards the precious stone. There were other jewels in the collection that were more valuable, but he never found himself thirsting, *lusting* after them as he did the Koh-i-noor. Richardson studied the diamond's past: the destruction and the death. Perversely, this only made him lust after it more. He occasionally wondered what had happened to the Richardson of old as all his thoughts began to concentrate themselves obsessively on the infamous diamond. If his wife had still been around she'd have noticed that Richardson's always rather cold and aloof nature was becoming ever more cynical and cruel. Through this period of metamorphosis his obsession with the Koh-i-noor increased with every passing hour, and he gradually began to believe that it was his destiny to remove the diamond from the Tower. With this new certainty growing within his heart, Richardson began reading about earlier attempts to rob the Crown Jewels. There had only ever been one, by a certain Colonel Thomas Blood in 1671.

Blood had gone to the tower disguised as a parson, and over a period of some weeks had gained the confidence of Talbot Edwards, the keeper, and promised to arrange a marriage between an imaginary nephew and Edwards's daughter. Blood and his accomplices became well acquainted with the Tower's security arrangements. On May 9th, 1671, the daring plan was enacted. Blood persuaded Edwards to show the Crown Jewels to his friends. After that, the gang bound and gagged Edwards and made off

with the loot. Edwards, however, was able to raise the alarm and the gang was captured. Blood was imprisoned in the Tower and refused to talk to anyone except the King. Charles II agreed to see Blood, and strangely, took a liking to the Irish rogue. On July 18th, 1671, Thomas Blood was released from his prison cell. His treasonable act should have led to his death, but he had found favor with King Charles and thus had his Irish states (which had been earlier confiscated) restored to him in their entirety. He was also granted a pension of five hundred pounds sterling a year. Voices whispered that at some time in his life, Blood had served the King well as a secret agent and that this was his reward. No other attempt on the Crown Jewels had ever been made.

Richardson prepared his plans carefully. A diversion needed to be created once he was inside the basement room that housed the Crown Jewel collection. Perhaps a smoke bomb would do the job. After that, a nerve agent would knock all the people out (or kill them if that gave him more time) and plastic explosives would destroy the protective casing surrounding the diamond. If executed correctly, the whole procedure wouldn't take more than three minutes. Finally, he'd simply walk out of the chamber with the Koh-i-noor safely stashed away in his bag. No one should be any the wiser for at least ten minutes and that would give him ample time to make his getaway, even with only one leg! He would also be armed to the teeth - just in case.

Richardson didn't want to get other felons involved with the heist. By taking all the risk, he wouldn't have to share his treasure. After he had acquired the stone, he

the third eye of shiva

would flee to Japan immediately and stay there for as long as was necessary. He thought no further than the joyous moment when he would be holding the world-renowned diamond in his hands.

If this entire plan seemed riddled with holes to the average thief, no similar thought ever occurred to Captain Richardson. A destructive power had taken him in its grasp and filled his every waking moment with a single and intense thought: get the Koh-i-noor! Somehow he felt sure that the diamond itself would help him at the critical moments. Soon, the Koh-i-noor would belong to him alone.

Richardson decided to go ahead with his robbery on a Friday morning at 10 a.m. Like a man in a dream, he made all the necessary preparations for the robbery. He'd acquired the smoke bombs, nerve gas and explosives. Everything was ready. His master would be pleased. His master? Who was this master? Richardson wasn't sure, but he venerated him all the same. Perhaps he was his own master? On some days he was almost sure of this. On the appointed day of the robbery however, he felt himself moved by a power and certainty far beyond that of his own puny capacities.

"The Crown Jewels are the regalia which have been used by English Kings and Queens since 1660 or earlier," began the blandly informative voice inside the well-protected chamber below the Tower of London. "The jewels are part of the national heritage and held by the Queen as Sovereign. England is the only European monarchy still using its regalia for the consecration ceremony of crowning the Sovereign..."

At this point in proceedings, Richardson threw down his smoke bombs and carefully placed a gas mask over his face. The smoke bombs also contained a nerve agent that would incapacitate and paralyze anyone who inhaled the gas - permanently! Through the special glass of his mask, Richardson continued to watch everything carefully. The next job confronting him was to break the glass case surrounding the Koh-i-noor diamond. A plastic explosive was carefully packed around it and moments later a great crash indicated that the last barrier had been surmounted. Richardson, with hands that trembled from excitement, lifted the Koh-i-noor diamond from its resting place inside the jewel case. Set inside its secondary and gratuitous home of the English Royal Crown, it glowed with the strangest hues of diaphanous color. For a moment Richardson looked at the precious stone in wonder - and then he began to laugh. At first his laughter was quiet and barely audible, but within just a few seconds it had increased in volume by tenfold, and an unbiased observer would certainly have stated his belief that the figure which stood in the center of the room surrounded by smoke and flame and laughing like a demon while gazing on the precious diamond, was quite, quite insane.

Moments later the security forces were inside the room and shooting at will. Oddly, the man in the gas mask did not fall. His laughter simply increased - and before the disbelieving eyes of the watching security guards he began to grow and change his form. Clothes were discarded as Richardson's height and weight were doubled: his skin began to alter to a light shade of blue. Eventually, the new

the third eye of shiva

creature's bulk broke the ceiling of the underground chamber and the heavy roof collapsed on the doomed guards. The blue form propelled itself through the hole at unimaginable speed, and as it left, a wave of tremendous destructive power hit the ancient building, reducing it to nothing more than a few scattered ruins. Hundreds of people died in that moment. Shiva had returned.

"What on earth are you saying? For goodness sake, I don't want to hear any mumbo-jumbo about the return of some loony Indian deity called Shiva! That monster must be a creature direct from outer space. It's an invasion from a being that is not of this world. There's no other way that a single man could have flattened the Tower of London and killed at least five hundred people in its wake."

Inspector O'Reilly of Scotland Yard was out of his depth, and everyone around him could see it. At 10.15 a.m. that day a bomb, or an alien from outer space, a disgruntled god, or *something* - but no-one quite knew what - had reduced the Tower of London to a few ruins, and about five hundred people who had been inside or near the Tower were no more of this world as a consequence. The Inspector was used to dealing with simple crimes like murder. Nothing had ever prepared him for something like this. Now, a Dr. Krishna Pandava was sitting calmly in front of him and telling him that the world cycle had ended and Shiva had returned in order to carry out his final function as Destroyer of the Heavens.

“The Koh-i-noor was the key,” commenced Dr. Pandava. “In more ancient times it was known as ‘The Third Eye of Shiva’, and in microscopic form it contains all the destructive force and power of Shiva himself. It is written in legend that when Shiva comes to reclaim the diamond as his own, this life cycle will be completed.”

“What the hell is a *life cycle*,” shouted Inspector O’Reilly, without even a glimmer of comprehension in his eyes or voice.

Dr. Pandava replied slowly and quietly.

“Inspector, Hindus believe that life and death, creation and re-creation, is nothing but a cycle that perpetually repeats itself. The three principles of creation, sustenance, and negation are realized by a great triumvirate of deities. First Brahma creates, and then Vishnu maintains this creation until it is finally the turn of Shiva to perform his dance of death and negate everything. That time has come. Shiva has returned to destroy this cycle of life. From the ruins, Brahma will create again and Lord Vishnu will again sustain the new existence until it is once again the turn of Shiva to perform his dance of death and reduce the new cosmos to the primordial nothingness. This is the cycle of life, that we can by no means escape.”

O’Reilly shook his head in shock and disbelief.

“These are all fables, stories for children and primitive peoples. Accurate symbols, perhaps, of some general scientific truths. But don’t tell me, for god’s sake, that this triumvirate of Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva actually *exists*.”

Dr. Pandava’s reply was quick and certain.

“Of course it exists, Inspector. As you can clearly

the third eye of shiva

observe for yourself.”

O'Reilly gazed at the slight, dusky figure of the man sitting in the chair in front of him with an incomprehension that slowly crystallized into fear. Who the hell was this Pandava? In the aftermath of the morning's tragedy, Dr. Krishna Pandava of London University's Oriental Philosophy Department had phoned in, saying that he had vital information to confer. Now it turned out that it was merely an insight into an ancient philosophy that he could offer rather than any hard facts.

“And let's say you're right - just for argument's sake. Are you telling me that this character, Shiva, is going to destroy the world because this cycle of existence is about to end and that *there is absolutely nothing that we can do about it?*”

Dr. Pandava's eyes flickered momentarily with some deep emotion. Then, his equanimity returned and he spoke.

“There is a chance that we might delay the inevitable dissolution by a hundred thousand years or so. Shiva is early because this abominable Koh-i-noor has influenced him to terminate everything now. The evil god that dwells within the diamond is a feminine spirit that loves her master, Shiva, too well. She has deluded him so that the early dissolution will also comprehensively eliminate all minor gods and god-like figures from the realms of *prakriti* (or *existence*) - both in the present, and in the future. This will include the total extinction of Shiva's own consort, Parvati, who is hated by the spirit of the Koh-i-noor. She has dreamt for countless millennia of taking her place alongside Shiva, Lord of the Death Dance.”

Inspector O'Reilly hadn't been following any of this.

Dr. Pandava had lost him as soon as he'd begun to speak of the Koh-i-noor goddess's jealousy and abiding love for her master, Shiva. O'Reilly was now totally convinced that he was dealing with some academic nut in his office and he wanted to be rid of Pandava as soon as possible so he could get on with trying to find some real answers to the tragedy of the morning.

"Dr. Pandava..." began O'Reilly, in what he hoped was a calm and quiet voice, "why don't you go back to the university and give the matter some more thought? Then, if you come up with anything fresh, you can phone me here. I'm sure..."

But nobody was destined to discover what Inspector O'Reilly was sure of, as at that very moment the telephone on the table between them began to squeal peremptorily. O'Reilly snatched it up.

"Yes, what is it?" The Inspector listened to the news like a man in a nightmare. After about five minutes, O'Reilly replaced the receiver and spoke to Dr. Pandava in a tremulous voice.

"That was the French. This Shiva of yours has just destroyed the Eiffel Tower. Hundreds of people are dead."

Pandava nodded his head slowly, without any display of emotion.

"I had thought that something similar would happen. We don't have much time, Inspector. Shiva has already begun his dance of death."

The destruction of the Eiffel Tower had been similar to that of the

the third eye of shiva

Tower of London. A sudden upward rush by the entity known as Shiva - a forward dash that had left only smashed matchstick girders and human corpses in its wake. Dr. Krishna Pandava's accuracy of prediction regarding Shiva was beginning to convince the people of the world that he did indeed possess some ancient arcane knowledge that might, just possibly, prevent the utter extermination of the human race. He'd hastily been summoned to the White House, in America, for an audience with the bemused President.

"Dr. Pandava, could you please repeat these incredible assertions again so that these gentlemen from the Council for National Security might hear them?"

Pandava nodded his head calmly.

"Naturally I can, sir. At the ending of the world (Armageddon, as you call it), it is Shiva's first function to destroy the world's five most magnificent manmade structures. He has already destroyed two of them. I believe that he will soon also destroy your Empire State Building: the edifice that is most representative of the modern era. Next, he will return to his own ancient continent of Asia where the ancient pyramids of the Egyptians shall be obliterated, and then the great Taj Mahal of Agra itself. With this symbolic work in the human field then complete, all that will be left to accomplish shall be the final sacrificial and symbolic destruction in the field of nature itself: the obliteration of Mount Everest in the Himalayas. Finally, he will shout the holy, but in this instance also destructive, syllable 'OHM', and the fabric of existence itself will crack." The eyes of the two security men had narrowed while they'd

been listening to Pandava's story. Now one of them responded harshly.

"What kind of bullshit is this? We're fighting for our very existence and this crazy specimen wants to tell us fairy tales. President, there is only one thing we can do..."

What this "one thing" may have been, no one was destined to discover, as at that very moment a secretary burst into the President's office to gasp out some gruesome news.

"Sir, that... monstrosity has just knocked down the Empire State Building like it was made of matchsticks. Thousands are dead."



And so it continued. As Pandava had predicted, Shiva next crossed the Atlantic and traveled down quickly to Africa where the destruction of the pyramids in a great fireball also incinerated half the population of Cairo. From there, Shiva took a direct route into his own mysterious sub-continent. The obliteration of the Taj Mahal, with a million accompanying deaths, signified the end of one symbolic movement in the destroyer's great dance of death. He then headed for Mount Everest in the Himalayas to perform his final mammoth act of dissolution.

No one had understood when Dr. Krishna Pandava had asked to be set down in a remote Buddhist temple at the foot of the great mountain. Did he wish to do some meditating before Shiva obliterated everything? The disappointed people who thought so would have been

the third eye of shiva

surprised if they'd heard and been able to understand Pandava's prayer.

"O great Parvati, spouse of Shiva, come and open up your husband's eyes to the deception practiced upon him by the dark goddess of the Koh-i-noor. Why do you sleep, beautiful Parvati? In just a short time from now, you will sleep forever and your martial husband will have a new, evil spouse at his side forever more. Parvati, you who have settled great disputes between Shiva and myself, come now and take what is your own. Unless you come and open up your husband's eyes, I am doubtful that this cycle can be prevented from ending prematurely. The resultant evil will end much karma that should by no means terminate now. This cycle has another hundred thousand years to run, and existence on this planet will achieve wonderful things in that time. Humans will master space travel and explore the majesty of the vaulted heavens. They will become enlightened and reach Nirvana. Deny them this and a great evil will have been done in the moral fabric of the universe itself. Parvati, do not let a lesser woman's obsession blight an entire age. Parvati Shanta, come and possess your husband. Come. Come. Come."

The world was wrapped in Stygian darkness as Shiva approached great Mount Everest. He slowly emerged from out of the east in the guise of a naked ascetic, riding on the back of the white bull, Nandi, and accompanied by a train of hideous demons encircled with serpents and necklaces of skulls. In

his right hand he bore a black trident. Over the great mountain blue lightning flashed, storm clouds billowed, and great hurricanes roared. Torrents of rain poured down onto the fertile Himalayan plains and, slowly at first, began to submerge them in the creation of a new apocalyptic sea.

Suddenly, Shiva stopped and thrust his great black trident upwards into the tumultuous sky. All the lightning of the heavens flowed into the blunt, three-pronged instrument and Shiva himself was transfigured before the very eyes of his army of demons. Slowly, ever so slowly, Shiva directed the pulsating trident at the base of Everest itself. After a moment he screamed, and all the stored up energy of the heaven's vault poured forth in a mighty torrent from the destroyer's trident. All the colors of the spectrum flashed around that critical point, where reality itself was destined to collapse into nothingness this day. Black waters foamed and roared as the great Everest crumbled into nothingness. The god, Shiva, took out his horn and sounded it three times. In the silence that followed the great destroyer cupped his hands around his mouth and began to intone the fateful syllable.

“OH...”

Now, at the last possible moment, a great white horse emerged from the roaring black sea and on its back sat Lord Vishnu himself, in his final reincarnation as Kalki. Behind him, holding her arms around his waist, sat Shiva's beautiful consort, Parvati, her long black hair trailing in the sea below. On her ring finger glowed the beautiful green emerald that her husband, Shiva, had presented to her aeons ago as a sign of his perpetual faith and love. Parvati pointed

the third eye of shiva

the ring at Shiva's head and a new ocean of green light poured out and straight into Shiva's eyes. The great Lord of the Dance roared out a single name.

"Parvati..."

All was lost in confusion. The tumultuous storms continued to roar across the face of the earth as existence itself hung in the balance. Then, suddenly, the skies began to lighten and the newly created pristine sea of Shiva grew gradually less agitated. After some moments, a new sun came up over a tranquil blue sea. Nothing remained of Mount Everest or the hilly gardens of the Himalayas. Silence reigned over the face of the earth.

"Tell me - what the hell just happened?" a stunned US President asked a group of his top advisors inside the privacy of the White House.

One of them, a malnourished looking man in black-framed glasses, began to speak uncertainly.

"Well, sir, if we stick to facts alone, we can say that Mount Everest has disappeared, a new sea has been created separating the Indian sub-continent from its northern neighbors, and millions of people have died. In spite of this terrible destruction, the monstrous creature, Shiva, seems to have left us and the situation on our planet seems once again stable."

The President stroked his chin thoughtfully.

"He said we had a hundred thousand years."

"Who did?" enquired the emaciated looking advisor.

“Dr. Krishna Pandava. What the hell happened to him, anyway? One minute he was here spouting philosophy and the next he was taking off on some wild goose chase to the Himalayas.”

The bespectacled advisor drew a blue envelope from an inside pocket.

“He left you this letter before he went, sir. I never had an opportunity to give it to you before now.”

Silently, the President took the letter from the other man’s hand and ripped it open. For a moment he read in silence - and as he read, the strangest of expressions spread over his features. Finally, he tossed the letter back to his advisor.

“Read it. Aloud, for everyone to hear.”

The malnourished looking advisor nodded and searched around in his inside pocket for his reading glasses. After a change over in spectacles, he finally began to read.

Three Gods rule the world: Brahma the creator, Vishnu the preserver, and Shiva the destroyer. This process of creation, preservation and destruction represents an entire cycle of existence. It is necessary for each cycle of existence to complete itself to the last appointed day in order to allow the collective karma of the world, and those within it, to fully work itself out. In this way, each cycle of existence approaches nearer and nearer to final perfection, or Nirvana. Lord Vishnu does his job of preserving the world by incarnating himself at times of crisis. Great evil and destruction ensues if for some reason an age is brought to an end prematurely.

the third eye of shiva

Due to the evil love that the goddess of the Koh-i-noor bears for her master, Shiva, our present age is threatened with such a premature termination. The Goddess of the diamond has befuddled the mind of great Shiva and convinced him that our age has already reached its dissolution point. She has done this knowing that an early termination to existence will totally destroy the lesser gods, including Shiva's own beloved consort, Parvati. Only Parvati can save us now. I must go to the Himalayas and pray for her intervention with her husband. If I am able to contact her and she is willing to act, the terrible consequences of a premature termination might yet be avoided. But who am I, you ask? Allow me to share with you the truth.

In my first incarnation, I appeared as a fish, matsya, and saved the human race from a ruinous flood. As Kurma, the turtle, I helped the gods and non-gods to churn the ocean of milk, which held in its divine treasures. As Varaha the boar, I used my tusks to raise the earth, which had sunk in the sea, while as Narsimha I killed the demon that no other could defeat. In the guises of Vamana and Parsuram I saved the human race again. In my seventh incarnation as Rama, I slew the demon Ravan, while as Krishna, I helped the right-minded Pandavas to defeat the villainous Kauravas. My ninth incarnation was as Gantama - the much-loved Buddha who initiated a new and noble religion. My tenth incarnation will also be the last in this cycle. As the world teeters on the brink of complete chaos, I will appear as Kalki, rising from the sea on a white horse. It is my destiny to make the attempt to roll back the forces of destruction and chaos that are threatening mankind for one

jon aristides

last time. The final result of my action is yet unknown.

There was a long silence in the room after the President's advisor finished reading Dr. Krishna Pandava's letter. Finally, one of the aides present asked the single question that was on everyone's mind.

"What on earth does that mean?"

The President gazed at the man for a long moment.

"It means, my friends," he said gravely, "that we have another hundred thousand years to get the job done. No more, and no less."

the plastification of Gerald harrison

*P*erhaps some of you have already heard about my great discovery: plastification. It is a process that I discovered as a young anatomy student in Heidelberg. Basically, you take a fresh corpse, soak it in certain chemical solutions (sorry not to be more specific, but I have lots of rivals out there), dry the body, allowing liquid plastic to take the place of the water - and voila! You have an eternal corpse. The resultant cadaver doesn't smell, and can be examined in minute detail for anatomical purposes. I've even had exhibitions of my little children - playing basketball, football... whatever.

Where do I get my corpses from, you might ask? They mostly come from friendly donors. In fact, I've just finished the plastification of my best friend, Gerald Harrison. It's a rather long and sad story, though. Gerald had been hopelessly in love with a Polish lady for 25 years and had finally decided that he couldn't stand it any longer. He had his own wife and children, but he was living a lie. All he ever thought about was his beautiful ex-mistress, who was now princess of a small duchy in her native Poland. Finally, his courage gave out and he'd asked me to plastify him.

"At least I'll be of some use to someone like that," he'd

added gloomily.

Thus, it had all been arranged. Gerald had requested me to make his passing quick; so one night while his wife and children were at a party, he'd invited me around with the intention of getting stuck straight into the job. We relaxed in his sitting room over a Johnny Walker, and for half an hour or so I listened to his litany of hopelessness. Finally he was ready to take the first step, so I passed him a little white pill. This innocuous looking thing was actually a cyanide tablet that would kill him in moments.

He took the pill boldly and looked me straight in the eye.

"This one's for the Princess," were his last words before popping the pill into his mouth. Seconds later he fell on the floor, yelling in agony, before finally dying a couple of moments later.

Gerald was now ready for plastification. I had come prepared with my various chemical solutions and bag of liquid plastic, so (after undressing him) I dragged the deceased into the bathroom, where I'd already prepared a hot bath, and poured various concoctions into the still waters. I heaved the corpse into the bath and left it to soak. I had about three hours before the return of Gerald's wife and children, but planned to finish the job in two: my plastification techniques were becoming very streamlined. The corpse would be dried out in an hour and a half, and the replacement with liquid plastic would take another half an hour.

Having little to do while Gerald was soaking, I went back into the lounge and poured myself another Johnny

the third eye of shiva

Walker. Gerald had made the right decision. Plastified, he would finally be at peace.

An hour and twenty minutes later I checked the bath and was gratified to observe that Gerald's body had thoroughly dried out. I drained the water and covered Gerald's corpse with my bag of liquid plastic before running a fresh bath. Now, the final chemical reaction between the water and the liquid plastic would begin. Gerald's apotheosis was almost complete.

Half an hour later, I looked at Gerald as he sat opposite me in the same seat he'd been sitting in earlier that evening, and felt a ripple of pride run down my spine. Gerald would have been so pleased! I had placed a cigar in his hand in a very life-like manner, and a little table and an ashtray next to his chair. I thought he had regained the same devil-may-care look of his youth, before he'd met the Princess.

I glanced at my watch. Just coming up to ten o' clock. Gerald's wife and children would be home any minute now - and what a surprise was waiting for them! In one way, everything seemed the same as when they'd left, with Gerald and I sitting and smoking in opposite chairs. However, this Gerald would last for eternity and had none of the frailties of the old one. I had to admit, however, that the new Gerald had a few weaknesses of his own. One of his plastified eyes had fallen out of the skull socket and onto his chest even as I'd been admiring him.

Suddenly, I heard a key turn in the lock. Gerald's wife and children had returned from the party, and they wasted no time in entering the lounge where we sat.

"Hello, you two; still chatting and smoking after three

hours?” asked Marcia lightly, as she entered the room with Timothy and Prudence at her side.

What happened next, I cannot fully explain, although I’m quite sure that it had something to do with latent *Samskaras* from my friend’s unfulfilled past.

Gerald turned his head and grinned at his wife and children, one eye lolling lazily on his chest. Next, he actually spoke.

“Hi Marcia. I’ve been in the bath while you were out, but I’m not feeling as good as I expected.”

With these words, Gerald fell onto the floor and started thrashing around and kicking his sinewy red legs up in the air.

“Argggghh,” he screamed laconically. “I’ve been plastified and I still can’t forget that fucking Princess. Helllllp.”

Of course, Marcia and the kids were put out and angry with me for a while, but they soon relented. After a moment or two, Gerald had slumped on the floor and become quite lifeless again - and after I’d explained everything to her, Marcia even went so far as to say that she preferred Gerald plastified as he’d obviously been very unhappy before. The kids were less easy to convince... but what the hell? You can never please everyone!

the arab

*I*t was just about five o' clock, on 30 December and the rather flurried looking westerner was rushing down the main street of the Bab Al Bahrain towards a money transfer office, hoping to transfer a substantial payment to his wife's account in England before the new year arrived. A mass of cosmopolitan humanity from all corners of the earth jostled around him. Suddenly, his forward motion was halted by an Arabic shoulder belonging to a man heading in the opposite direction. The Englishman staggered a little from the contact, but quickly continued his onward movement. The fifty year-old Arab called out to him in excellent English.

"My dear friend, don't you recognize me?"

Unwillingly, the hurrying man (who was about forty) stopped in his tracks and looked around. The genial Arab immediately grabbed hold of his hand and gave it a gentle squeeze.

"I think you do not recognize me. Do you know who I am?"

The Englishman looked more closely at the Arab who stood before him. He had a beneficent smile on his face and was clearly awaiting the European's response. The Englishman smiled, but said nothing. He had lived and

worked in the Arabic world for ten years now and he knew that the question was rhetorical. After a moment, his conviction was confirmed.

“Tell me, where do you work?” asked the Arab, still with the beaming smile on his lips.

“At the university,” replied the Englishman, inwardly cursing his luck. Some minion from the university, where he had been working as a lecturer for the last three months, had accosted him. Probably, the man wanted to show off his English skills and wish him “Happy New Year”. However, the lecturer was also flattered in a sense. Probably, the Arab had noticed how much at ease he was in the Middle East and wished to communicate with an Anglo-Saxon who understood and sympathized with the Arabic cause. After all, he could spare a few moments and perhaps it was a good idea to make a friend of this possibly influential man, whoever he was.

“I am Abdulla Al Dossary,” pronounced the Arab at last, as if the pronunciation of the name would immediately dispel all confusion. “I am head of security at the university and made out your security card when you arrived.”

The Englishman thought for a moment. Yes, there had been a smiling middle-aged Arab who had prodded the rest of his team into some immediate action when he’d told them that he needed his university ID urgently. If this was the man, it would be a good thing to be polite and friendly, he might prove a useful ally at some time in the future.

“Nice to see you again, Abdulla,” pronounced the Englishman in the friendliest of tones. “I remember that you helped me a lot on my arrival.”

the third eye of shiva

The middle aged Arab ‘tush-tushed’, inviting the lecturer to take a quick coffee with him. The Englishman looked briefly in the direction of the money transfer office that he’d been headed towards and then he nodded his head. It would only take a moment, and the Arab would be offended if he refused. Five minutes later, the two men sat opposite each other in a small Indian café with two Turkish coffees in front of them. At last, the Arab spoke.

“I like Americans very much.”

The European smiled and nodded. By definition, the Englishman wasn’t American, but it was a common enough error on the part of the Arabs to mix up Americans and Englishmen. Once again, he felt vaguely flattered by the mistake that the man had made. Perhaps he looked cooler than most of the Englishmen around.

“There is one American in the university that I really like, but I can’t remember his name.”

“Dr. John Smith?” enquired the lecturer disingenuously. He hated the man himself and wondered what his newfound friend’s response would be. The Arab shook his head vigorously and made a dismissive gesture.

“Not him.”

The Englishman began to warm to the Arab, who was demonstrating the most excellent taste.

“Dr. Graham Hill, perhaps?”

Again the Arab shook his head and again the Englishman inwardly approved of the man’s taste. Hill was a conceited idiot. Finally, he put forward the name of an African American professor, whom he liked a lot.

“Perhaps you’re thinking of Casper Green?”

The Arab clapped his hands together in a sign of confirmation, a great smile on his swarthy face.

“Yes, I meant Casper Green.”

For the next few moments, the middle-aged man began to speak of his family and the Englishman allowed his mind to drift off a little. It was beginning to get late and he should soon make his excuses and be off in order to make the intended payment to his wife. Suddenly, something that the Arab said caught his attention and he began to listen more closely.

“My wife and children have gone to Dubai for a few days and I needed to pay for their three tickets. I have reached my daily limit of 500 Bahraini dinars in the bank. However, I desperately need another 40 dinars today, in order to pay for...” The Englishman, in his dismay, lost the actual reason for the Arab’s need. It was clear in any case that he was going to try and touch him for a loan. The Arab’s voice was continuing.

“I was so happy to see you this evening. I knew that you would help me.”

The Englishman took a deep breath. He had been trapped. Certainly, he would never have taken coffee with the university security man if he’d ever guessed what was in the offing. However, now that they sat together in friendship with coffee in front of them, it was extremely difficult to say no. A negative answer might even make an actual enemy of the man. The European had lived in the Arabic world for many years and he prided himself on understanding the typical Arab mentality pretty well. Forty dinars was about \$100 USD - a rather large amount for a

the third eye of shiva

casual loan. The middle aged Arab began to speak again.

“Do not worry, my friend. It is only for one evening. Tomorrow, I will return the money. My salary is good. I take more than 900 Bahraini dinars. The Englishman nodded slowly, having reluctantly reached a decision.

“It is not a problem,” he lied. “I will just have to go to the bank and draw out some more money.”

The Arab shook the Englishman’s hand gratefully and after he’d paid, the two men got up and left the small café.

“You still don’t have a car, doctor. Let me give you a lift home,” offered the Arab as the two men walked slowly towards the bank. It irritated the Englishman that the Arab thought that he could not move around without his aid.

“That’s OK. I need to do a few jobs before I go home.”

After a moment, the men reached the nearby bank and the Englishman withdrew a hundred dinars, immediately handing over forty of them to the Arab standing by his side.

“Now I must go,” said the Englishman, wanting to be free of the duplicitous security man as soon as possible. To his amazement, the Arab now began, in hurried words, to plead for more money.

“My dear friend, I underestimated my needs tonight for fear of displeasing you. Can you perhaps give me one hundred dinars? I will pay you back tomorrow. You already have my mobile phone number (this had passed between them during the conversation in the café)...”

Finally, the Englishman began to show his growing anger.

“Abdulla, I have already given you what I can. I have

my own responsibilities. Just now, I am about to send money to my wife in England and I can hardly afford what I have already given to you.”

The old Arab began to plead even more desperately.

“Only until tomorrow. I will pay back *everything* tomorrow.”

The Englishman shook his head decidedly.

“I am sorry, Abdulla. I have given you what I can afford. If you need more, you must ask someone else. Loved ones are relying on me and it is my first responsibility to look after them.”

“Please my friend,” begged the Arab ever more piteously... “Just sixty then.”

Again, the Englishman shook his head, having now lost all sympathy for the security man and his problems. It entered the Englishman’s head that he might actually have problems getting back the money that he had already given to the man.

“I am sorry, no.”

The Arab’s face flamed a vicious look of deep hatred at the European for a split second. The flash of sudden hatred was mixed with astonishment and the vague beginnings of some other emotion - could it have been fear?

“Alright,” replied the Arab backing quickly away. “I will get the rest of the money from somewhere else.” With these words, he turned around and hurried quickly away into the darkness. The Englishman stood for some moments looking at the point of blackness into which the middle-aged Arab had disappeared. Slowly, he turned around and began to direct his steps towards the financial

the third eye of shiva

center from where he intended to send his money home. As he walked, he was thinking deeply - and with every moment that passed, he found himself feeling more and more ill at ease. At last he stopped, took out his mobile phone, and leaned against a shop wall. Silently he dialed a number.

“Hello, Mustafa, how are you? I wanted to ask if you have ever heard of a security officer called Abdulla Al Dossary at the university?”

It seemed that Mustafa’s reply was not to the Englishman’s satisfaction, for as he listened to the speaker’s words, his brows drew together and a black look darkened his features. The conversation ended a few moments later and the man replaced the mobile in his pocket before hurriedly resuming his walk.

the poetry reading

I had actually gone along to the poetry reading because I was feeling fed up and lonely. On Thursday afternoon they were meeting at Starways coffee house, upstairs. They would be reading their favorite poems, discussing them, and looking at *The Merchant of Venice* with an eye on the possibility of future performance. Everybody knew that it was really just a chance for Siva to get a lot of people to meet for coffee. Can you imagine anything more embarrassing than reading out poems in Starways, and then telling a lot of acquaintances and strangers why you like them? Remember too, that this was supposed to be for enjoyment! What an utterly crazy idea... Yet here I was, standing outside Starways on Thursday afternoon.

I walked into the coffee house, which was fairly busy downstairs, and over to the spiral staircase at the back which led to the upper floor. Even as I began to climb, I could hear a sonorous voice intoning some well-known lines.

*"Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?
Thou art more temperate and more lovely..."*

It was Evangelina, as I knew, and again I had the strong sensation that I was in the wrong place. Did I really care why she'd chosen that poem and what it meant to her? Obviously, I didn't.

I arrived just as Evangelina terminated the sonnet, and everyone seated at the two packed tables turned to greet me.

"Hi Peter, nice to see you. Glad you could make it."

I mumbled something about the pleasure being all mine - and suddenly realized that the only reason that they were being so nice, was because they felt uneasy. All of the people present were colleagues and acquaintances. No one knew anyone else very well. You might say that we were all present on sufferance. It had been Siva's idea to concoct this pointless exercise, and he was the ideal man for the job - he was pleasant with everyone, but not too close to anyone. Everyone was tangled in the strictures that he'd applied through inviting us in the first place. We had acknowledged our wish to come to a busy place, filled with strangers, in order to read poems aloud: poems that had personal and emotional meaning for us. We wanted to shed our skins, bore all the others present with our lost loves, lost opportunities, periods of great sadness and joy, and then wash it all down politely with a cup of tea or coffee. I began to think that I'd made a mistake.

Siva invited me to sit in the seat right next to him. It seemed that the completion of the sonnet had created a kind of lull and nobody appeared too eager to rush into the breach. Consequently, Siva turned his attention to me.

"Peter, you've arrived at just the right time. What did

the third eye of shiva

you have planned to read for us?”

I had actually planned to read some T.S Eliot, but all those staring blank faces convinced me that it would have been a futile exercise.

“I’d planned on reading some Bob Dylan,” I lied.

“Bob Dylan? Good. Good. One of his protest songs?”

“No. His song about democracy.”

Siva nodded his head enthusiastically, while the others looked on politely with a film of glassy boredom covering their eyes.

“Democracy, huh? Well, I’m sure that we all have very strong ideas about that concept. We’re all listening. Shoot!”

I coughed once. I coughed a second time. Actually, I was desperately trying to remember the relevant lines from ‘Infidels’. Finally, I thought I had it.

*“Democracy don’t rule this world,
You’d better get that in your head.
This world is ruled by violence,
Though I guess that’s better left unsaid.”*

There was a heavy silence after I’d finished intoning these words. Finally, Siva spoke.

“Good. Good. The idea that we don’t have true democracy: there is too much corruption and lies. I like it. I like it a lot!”

“Well, I don’t think that you’ve really got hold of it,” I replied slowly. “That’s really not it at all. I would say that Dylan is saying that democracy itself is a sham. Whatever political system may be professed, the reality is that victory

always goes to the strongest. It's not a moral equation. Whoever has the biggest guns will always win. Might is Right."

"But that's a very cynical point of view," piped up a very plain and correct spinster, who had probably read something from *Paradise Lost*.

"Of course it is," I replied. "But just because a truth is unpalatable, that doesn't mean that it isn't the truth."

Siva recommenced, but this time in an entirely different tone.

"Want to know something true? I'm really sorry that I invited a cynical asshole like you to our cozy meeting here. You just don't get it. We're not here to see how the world really is. We only want to feel ourselves superior to those people that make the life and death decisions. We're not smarter than them, or stronger, or happier, but as long as someone like you doesn't go spoiling things, we can at least delude ourselves that we're more cultured. Do you get it now, asshole?"

Everybody seemed transfixed by Siva's words and there was a moment of complete silence. Then there was a sudden roar of anger - and I knew that it had issued from my own throat.

I sprang to my feet, opened my palm, and dealt Siva a tremendous blow on the side of his head. He, in his turn, rose to his feet and let loose a roundhouse right that caught me nicely on the side of the jaw. We fell to the floor, fighting desperately, with all the other people in the room staring at us wildly.

"Give him one right in the nose for me, Siva," came

the third eye of shiva

the spinster's shrill voice, as we struggled and tumbled over the dirty floor.

Just as I received another tremendous right to the jaw, someone started vigorously shaking me and I began to float upwards, as if from a profound depth.

"Wake up! Wake up!" a familiar female voice was saying. "You're dreaming."

I blinked my heavy eyelids open to see my own dear wife bending over my bed with irritation etched across her features. She was in her dressing gown, and it was still dark outside.

"I was dreaming?"

"Yes, you asshole. Now, let's talk some more about our divorce."

the soul of lizzie parker

*A*fter making a success of my first novel, I'd sat back for some time and rested on my laurels. However, modern publishing is a cutthroat business, and after two years I found that my book was no longer selling as well as previously - and also that new authors were beginning to push me aside. It was time to make a triumphant comeback with a second novel; but this was easier said than done. In the great metropolis of London, I could get nothing started, as sweet distraction diverted my attention in every direction except that of my typewriter. Finally, I resolved to rent a house in the country for the autumn of 1895 in order to work out the plot of my next book. I struck lucky immediately, as a Chelsea estate agent was able to acquire a seventeenth-century cottage for my use, at a reasonable price, on the edge of the Essex marshes.

The house was near to a small village called Roxham, where about one hundred and fifty people lived. I received supplies from the Roxham shops twice a week and a local woman came to do my housework three times a week. In this tranquil environment I soon began to make some progress with my book. I would get up at seven each morning, eat my breakfast and, when the weather allowed,

take a ramble over the marshes for half an hour before starting work punctually at eight-fifteen. I would work at my desk straight through until mid-day and then take a break to eat a frugal lunch and nap for a few hours. On waking up at four, I'd take a second ramble over the moor before returning home to eat again at five. At seven, I returned to my novel and examined the ideas of that morning in a critical light. Finally, after a brief supper, I'd read for an hour before retiring to bed before ten o' clock.

This Spartan regime worked wonders for my creative faculties and after just a few weeks I was far further on with my new novel than I could ever have thought possible. However, my good luck was not to last, and a simple event transformed the nature of my stay near Roxham completely.

I had no neighbors within a three-mile radius and the only sign of civilization that I would see on the moorland during my regular walks was a ruined and abandoned cottage half a mile distant from the one in which I was staying. The cottage seemed to have been built at the same period and in the same fashion as my own. Why it should have fallen into disrepair while my own had survived was a mystery that didn't trouble my mind at all in those first weeks of my stay. Later, however, after strange events began to unfold, I gave my mind over to the minutest speculation on the origins and condition of that strange dwelling place.

It all started in the oddest way. I was just thinking about retiring to bed one night after resolving some particularly tricky plot problems when a sudden and

the third eye of shiva

importune knocking disturbed my reverie. Who on earth could it be at nearly ten o' clock at night? I had no neighbors for more than three miles around and, in consequence, the sudden pounding on my door elicited a more than usual anxiety. My tensed nerves relaxed though as the sound of an educated woman's voice came to me clearly through the heavy wooden door.

"I beg you sir, for the sake of all that is good, to open your door and help me. I have been injured and am losing blood."

Naturally, I immediately strode over to the door, lifted the heavy latch and flung it open. Outside a sorry spectacle met my eyes. A beautiful, dark haired woman in a long white dress stood on my threshold, swaying from side to side. Blood was pouring profusely from her shattered nose and I expected her to swoon on to my hearth at any moment. I took hold of the woman's left arm and led her gently into the safety of my home.

"My dear lady, what on earth has happened to you? I am afraid your nose is broken and you need more help than I am able to give. Nevertheless, rest by my fire and I will do what I can to assist." Although by no means proficient in such matters, I did have a little training in first aid and with the help of bandages and various unguents I was eventually able to stop the flow of blood. I did my best to make a splint for the woman's shattered nose in the hope that I might be able to regain something of its original shape. The woman in front of me was truly beautiful, with fine bone structure and the palest of complexions. She had eyes of an elusive blue color and her

thick black hair, which I assumed she usually wore up, hung thickly behind her shoulders and right down to her little waist. The great blue eyes peered into mine and I saw the shadow of a strange regret appear and dissolve again before the poor lady began to speak.

“Thank you for your kindness, sir. My name is Elizabeth Parker, and we are neighbors. I live just over the moor from you. You are able to see my house from your front window.”

I looked at the woman hard. I had no neighbors, and the only house within three miles of my own was a hollow ruin. In order to confirm this, I strode over to the front window and gazed out over the black moor. To my astonishment, I saw a light shining on two floors from a house about half a mile away: exactly the place where the ruined cottage should have been. For some moments I stared dumbly out of the window, attempting to make sense out of the senseless. Finally, I concluded that I must have somehow missed a small occupied dwelling that stood next to the ruin: it was, after all, the only sane explanation. My mind returned to the more immediate matter of the woman’s injuries.

“My dear lady, what on earth caused this terrible injury? Were you set upon by thieves and villains on the inhospitable moor?” The woman gave a short and bitter laugh before replying.

“A villain certainly, but not one unknown to me, for it was my own drunken husband, Matthew Parker, who caused this injury by punching me ferociously in the nose. I’m afraid I should have left him more than a year ago, but

the third eye of shiva

he was a good man when we married and I wished to help him over his alcohol addiction.” The woman’s words startled and disturbed me.

“Do you mean to say that your own husband is responsible for your injuries and that at this very moment he is skulking in that little house not more than half a mile from here?”

The young woman, (for I adduced that she could not be more than twenty-five), nodded her head gravely.

“Yes, he will be stretched out in an armchair now, sleeping like a baby. When he awakes tomorrow morning, he will have no recollection of having abused me this evening. When he sees my injuries he will cry and beg for my forgiveness, as he always does... And I... I shall forgive him, as I always do.”

“My dear lady,” I replied urgently, “you must not return to this monster and suffer further abuse. How you could possibly even consider forgiving such a maniac is totally beyond my comprehension. Tonight you will remain here with me: you may have my bed and I will take the armchair down here.”

The woman shook her head decisively and the thick black hair fell across her ample breasts in the most provocative way. With both hands, she pushed the mass of dark hair back over her shoulders. In spite of the blood, which had even become matted in the black hair, I found that the woman’s innate sexuality had affected me deeply. I tried to follow what she was saying.

“I am afraid it is impossible. Matthew will never let me leave him. He swears that if I ever make even a whisper of

my injuries to someone outside, he will kill me - and I believe him. But I believe that he loves me too, in his own strange way.”

I tried to convince the woman to stay, but nothing could affect her fixed purpose of returning to her worthless husband. About two hours after her arrival, with the most profuse thanks and carrying a borrowed lamp, she left me and returned to her home opposite.

The rest of that night passed uneasily enough for me and I blamed myself very much for allowing the beautiful woman to return home to a waiting monster. I resolved that at the first break of day, I would go over to the small house next to the ruin and insist that she go into Roxham with me. Once in the safety of that small village, she could see a professional doctor and also visit the local magistrate and relate her terrible story. With luck, her bestial husband would still be under the influence at the time I called.

Thus it was that shortly after dawn I crossed the moorland between my own cottage and the ruin opposite in search of the small house where the injured lady lived with her brutal husband. Forty-five minutes later, I had to accept a most amazing reality: no such house existed!

Not surprisingly, I was completely baffled by my discovery. Where on earth had the woman come from? Where had she returned? Had I been the victim of some elaborate hoax? I decided that later that day, I would travel into Foxham by coach. I had a lot of questions to ask.

Early in the afternoon of the same day, I found myself sitting across from Mr. Joshua Stirling, the estate agent I had rented the house from. He was narrating some nigh on

the third eye of shiva

incredible information to me.

“Some twenty years ago, Elizabeth Parker and her husband, Matthew, occupied the cottage opposite to where you are living at present. They were a quiet pair, who lived on some small inheritance of Lizzie’s. Matthew was an actor by profession, but it seems that for some years he had done nothing but drink and beat his wife. The gentleman who at that time was living in the same cottage where you at present rest, now deceased, was on several occasions disturbed late at night by the frantic knocking of Lizzie Parker, who suffered some terrible beatings at the hands of her inebriated husband. On one occasion, Mr. Graham, for that was his name, testified to the fact that the woman’s nose had been completely shattered. On another occasion, she had suffered a broken arm. Mr. Graham was a medical doctor and was able to patch the woman up, but she always refused his advice to take her complaints against her husband to the local magistrate. In fact, she always insisted on returning to the man after being helped.”

“On the night of October 4, 1875, Dr. Graham heard a furious knocking on his door just after ten o’ clock. On opening the door, he was horrified to observe Lizzie Parker moaning in agony on the floor with a knife pushed deeply into her stomach. He helped the poor woman into his house and laid her on the divan, where she expired some minutes later. The infuriated doctor went upstairs and took his army pistol from the locked drawer next to his bed. Later, he attested that his self-control had snapped under the strain of the terrible things he had witnessed and he had been determined to make Matthew Parker pay

dearly for Lizzie's death.

"Dr. Graham strode down the stairs and out into the black night. At least it should have been black. To his horror, he observed a raging fire consuming the cottage opposite his own. He immediately began running towards the flames, but by the time he reached the cottage it had already been destroyed by the terrible conflagration. Verdicts of murder and suicide were subsequently brought against Mr. Matthew Parker. It was decided that he had murdered his wife while in the mad throes of a drunken rage and then, on realizing what he had done, had set fire to the house where he lived and perished in the flames. That is the story of Matthew and Elizabeth Parker, and their tragic deaths here."

For some moments after Mr. Stirling had finished, I said nothing. Finally, I sighed and asked the estate agent the only possible question in the circumstances.

"Mr. Stirling, since the death of Lizzie Parker, has there been any suggestion of unusual activities in the vicinity of the ruined cottage?"

Stirling, a grey man of about fifty-five, shook his head.

"Not that I know of, anyway. What is it exactly, Mr. Smythe, that has interested you so much in the tragic history of the Parkers?" I replied in a non-committal way, determining to say nothing of what had transpired the previous night. The whole thing was fantastic and inexplicable and I needed time to think.

Over the next two weeks, I decided that perhaps it had all been some fantastic coincidence, or that I'd been the victim of someone's perverted and sick sense of

the third eye of shiva

humor. On the other hand, the blood had been real enough. I eventually put the strange event out of my mind and began to make more progress on my new book. Since my visitation, I had decided to tailor it as a classic English ghost story, and a few elements of Lizzie Parker's story had already been introduced into the tale. I decided that my protagonist, who I called Bessie, was earthbound due to the horrific nature and suddenness of her death.

One night at ten, nearly three weeks after Lizzie's first visit, I found myself making a few minor revisions to the seventh chapter of my book. I felt that the characterization was good, and the plot was beginning to come together. Unexpectedly, a furious hammering began at the front door and I stiffened in my chair. The most terrible pleading could be heard through the great oaken door.

"Oh dear sir, for the love of God, please help me. I am defenseless and my brutal husband has done me a most terrible injury. Please, let me in."

Like a man in some terrible dream who knows exactly what torment is about to befall him next, I rose from the chair and went across to the door, unlatched it and threw it open. Sure enough, there was the pathetic spectacle of Lizzie Parker in front of me, her beautiful face contorted in pain and her right arm, quite obviously broken, hanging uselessly at her right side. Once again the thick black hair lay loose around her shoulders, though a fringe had been inexpertly cut in the front; remedial work to solve the problem of the dried blood, I concluded.

Of course, I let her in and sat her down on the divan. The break was a bad one, but I was able to fix it up with a

splint and bandage. Lizzie stayed silent while I worked and occasionally I saw her tugging at the front of her hair, which had been cut a little too short. Finally I completed my work and stood up to address the woman.

"I have been able to give you some temporary ease. However, the break is a bad one and you should certainly go to the hospital for further treatment. I can arrange it for you myself, if you should so wish."

As before, the woman shook her head decisively.

"They would make me testify against Matthew, and that is something I would never do."

"Why do you support the monster so?" I enquired in bafflement and irritation. "Does he not deserve the scorn and contempt of every reasonable man and woman for the ways in which he has made you suffer?"

Lizzie Parker gave a sad little smile.

"It is not a question of justice or desert. What he has done to me is most unreasonable, but I love him and do not wish to leave him. Deep down, he is a good man who has simply gone astray, and I will stay by his side for as long as he needs me."

"And how long may that be, Lizzie?" I enquired quietly. She gave me a quick look before pulling the mass of black hair over her shoulder and stretching it out tight.

"I think I will cut it all," she murmured reflectively. "I am a woman in a war, and I have no time for aesthetic frivolity."

"Why are you still here, Lizzie?" I suddenly asked. "Why are you re-enacting the sad story of what happened twenty years ago for my benefit? Isn't there some place

the third eye of shiva

that you should go to rest? Why do you come to me as a living, breathing woman, when I know that you are long since dead and buried?"

Lizzie looked at me steadily.

"It is Matthew. He still needs me, and I cannot leave him. When it is time for us to go, we shall do so together. Until then, we are stuck in a single moment of time."

"And what in the name of God can help you to exit from this terrible repetition?" I cried, genuinely moved by the woman's constancy and endurance. Lizzie Parker looked up at me keenly.

"It is you, sir. You are the one who can help us both. But you must act quickly, for time is running short. Act quickly... quickly."

As I watched Lizzie Parker's intense, upturned face, it seemed that her body became lighter - even transparent - and some seconds later, to my absolute astonishment, the petite little figure sitting on my divan with her arm in a sling simply faded away into nothingness. Lizzie Parker had gone.

Over the next few days, I thought deeply on what had transpired and continually asked myself the same two questions: How on earth was I able to help Lizzie Parker and her husband, and in what sense was time short? I understood that Lizzie was in some sense re-enacting the events that had led up to her death and that the next visitation would result in her horrific murder - but what power did I have to stop that from happening? I sensed that the woman wanted me to do something before the final re-enactment - but what?

This question obsessed my mind for two days. What impressed me most about the extraordinary situation was the love and forgiveness of Lizzie for her husband. I felt that somewhere within that thought lay the answer to how I could help. God had forgiven man for his sins through the sacrifice of his own son, and Lizzie Parker had forgiven the sins of her husband through the sacrifice of her own soul. Lizzie had forgiven her husband's wrongdoings as God had forgiven men's. Perhaps Matthew needed to be convinced that he should cease his continuous self-accusations and forgive himself?

I felt almost certain that I had now hit upon the right solution to the problem and I determined to immediately seek out the aid of a priest in Roxham. I needed to relate the whole story of Lizzie Parker and bring him to the ruins of the Parker's cottage, from where he might release Matthew from the misery of his own condemnation.

I lost no time in returning to Roxham. First, I needed to find out where Lizzie was buried. I would then get the priest to return to the cottage with me and perform a kind of exorcism. There were four churches in the village of Roxham and, at the second, St. Christopher's, I found what I was looking for. It was a small catholic church and Lizzie was buried in the well-kept cemetery.

I read the brief information on the headstone of the grave with a desperate pity in my heart: Elizabeth Parker, 1850-1875, R.I.P.

The parish priest, Father Joseph O'Hoolihan, was a little man of around seventy years and he well remembered the events of twenty years previously. Lizzie had been

the third eye of shiva

buried in the churchyard, but Matthew, due to his terrible crimes, had been denied that blessing. In fact, no one had ever collected his ashes from the ruins of the burnt out cottage where, to the priest's best knowledge, they still lay.

I related my story to the priest, who listened in respectful silence. When I had finished, he nodded his head in apparent agreement.

"Yes, it is likely enough," began Father O'Hoolihan. "Lizzie Parker was desperately in love with her husband, and refused to leave him in spite of the advice she received from the people around her. She may still keep him company yet."

"But Father," I replied, "don't you think that Lizzie's love has redeemed Matthew? His crimes were against her and himself and she has freely forgiven him. Now, he should forgive himself as surely God will also, allowing them both to move on." The old priest thought deeply for some moments. Finally, he spoke.

"What you say may be true, but I cannot bring Matthew here. I'm afraid his crimes do not permit him to lie in sanctified ground. However, I can, as you suggest, come with you to the cottage one night at about ten - the time you have told me that strange things usually happen - and perform a blessing in its ruins. We can inform Matthew's spirit that his crimes are forgiven by those who matter: his wife, and God."

I agreed immediately to Father O'Hoolihan's plan and begged him to accompany me to the old ruined cottage that very night. Fortunately, the priest had no prior engagement that evening and he agreed. Thus it was that

the two of us stood together in the dark ruins of the Parker's cottage at a few minutes to ten that evening. Father O'Hoolihan had brought a bible, a rosary, and a crucifix to aid him in his work. There was complete silence all around as the priest began to recite his prayers and finger the beads. Finally, he read a passage from the New Testament concerning Christ's saving power, before speaking directly to Matthew in these words.

"Matthew, why are you still here? Lizzie, your wife, still loves you and has forgiven you for what happened. Your savior, Jesus Christ, has also forgiven you. Can you not also forgive yourself? Your long sojourn in the nether regions between life and death has caused Lizzie even more anguish. Due to her love for you she is unable to let you suffer alone and thus endures this limbo existence with you. It is time to forgive, to be forgiven, and to pass on. Do you hear me, Matthew Parker?"

Father O'Hoolihan paused for a moment and suddenly, out of the deathly silence, came a desperate moan that fairly made all the small hairs on the back of my neck stand on end, though it didn't appear to affect the priest at all. The long, drawn-out groan was repeated a few moments later and Father O'Hoolihan took a step forward, holding up the crucifix.

"Matthew Parker, free yourself and Lizzie. Go to Jesus with Lizzie at your side, and you will know the all-forgiving compassion of our Savior." Suddenly a wind sprang up from nowhere and shook the branches of the two or three trees that still grew in the deserted garden. The priest spoke again. "What you did was terrible, Matthew, but

the third eye of shiva

Lizzie still loves you, and for her sake, if not your own, it is time to leave this wretched existence and pass on.” The terrible groan repeated itself, though this time it was louder and more drawn out. At the tail end of its terrible falling cadence, words began to emerge in a recognizable form.

“I am worthless, worthless, worthless; both a murderer and a suicide. Where shall I go?”

“To your Maker!” thundered the old priest in the most peremptory of voices. “Go to your Maker and beg for his forgiveness. Be sure that you shall receive a merciful response.”

“You are an old fool,” returned the voice. “You know nothing of me and the evil I have done.” A horrible cackle followed these words, rising into a terrible crescendo before falling off into a whimpering cadence of soft sobs. I felt that it was time for me to intervene.

“Matthew,” I shouted, “think of your poor wife, Lizzie. Why should she suffer the same torments as you? It is not fair. Free her at least, I say, if you are determined on your foolish course of action.” Suddenly I felt a touch on my arm, and turning around I beheld the beautiful face of Lizzie Parker floating in space at my shoulder, looking straight at me with reproachful eyes.

“My dear friend,” she began, “thank you for trying to help, but I do not stay here against my will. I willingly remain earthbound in order to help my husband.” A great wail from Matthew’s spirit followed these words.

“Darling, my darling... don’t... I cannot bear it any longer.” Suddenly, Lizzie Parker’s floating form disappeared and the unnatural storm died down as quickly

and completely as it had begun. Father O'Hoolihan crossed himself and began to mutter Latin prayers with renewed vigor. We stayed on the site of the burnt-out cottage for another half hour and when we finally returned to my own cottage opposite, in our hearts I believe that we both carried the conviction that the story of Elizabeth and Matthew Parker was finally concluded - on the earthly plane at least.

Some eight months later, I finished my book and took my leave of the old cottage just outside Roxham. I had heard no more knockings on my door in the dead of night and I concluded that the sufferings of Lizzie Parker and her husband were now at an end.

However, if the truth be told, I will admit that I left my isolated cottage with some reluctance that summer. During Lizzie's two visits to my house, I had entirely fallen under her spell and, with despair, I had come to clearly realize in the lonely months which followed, that somehow, tragically, I had fallen in love with the soul of Lizzie Parker.

fearsome techniques

I had a terrible dream last night. It really made me feel like a piece of shit. It was one of those dreams where you're faced with your own cowardice - or lack of conviction. I have always believed that cowardice stems from lack of conviction. Why get killed or badly injured for something you don't believe in anyway? A person can be either a hero, or a coward, in any given set of circumstances. It will depend on the level of his conviction. I guess that's the reason why all those Japanese soldiers would never surrender in the Second World War: they had a very high level of commitment to their cause. If they hadn't had that level of commitment, perhaps they'd have been just the same as me in last night's dream: a stinking coward.

What about you? If some toughies were kicking your ass and loving every minute, would you tell them what they wanted to hear? My guess is that it would not depend on your character or personality: it would depend on your level of commitment. I'm quite sure that you'd give information about *things*, rather than be beaten up badly. Whether you'd give information about *people* too, would depend on your level of conviction. If somebody you really loved was involved... then maybe not.

That's how it was for me last night. The heavies only wanted some secret formula from me that would enable them to make nuclear weapons. Personally, I didn't care if this knowledge fell into the wrong hands. Or rather, I didn't care enough. Not enough to be beaten to a pulp and left in an uncertain state between life and death in the ICU of some local hospital, anyway. If someone I loved had been threatened then I might have found a deeper conviction. As it was, I just told them what they wanted to know. I could have been a hero in other circumstances, but last night I wasn't. I was a coward.

The dream reminded me of something that had happened some thirty years ago. Now the kids I'd been at school with in the nineteen sixties had been pretty rough and ready, but there had been one particularly little weedy guy - his name was Lester Smidgeon - who'd possessed the gift of making everyone absolutely terrified of him. A basic indifference to physical damage, combined with psychological techniques similar to those of the boxer, Mohammed Ali, made him the most feared 'psycho' in the school. On long Wednesday afternoons, in the woodwork class in particular, he would refine his fearsome techniques.

Stephen Birch was a big-shouldered bully who enjoyed persecuting those smaller and less powerful than him. He had a reputation as a rather fearsome fighter, but one rainy Wednesday afternoon, in the woodwork class, I watched him reduced to a trembling, sobbing hulk by Lester Smidgeon - who was only about a quarter of his size. There were a lot of cutthroat threats in Smidgeon's verbal pyrotechnics, but I believe his most effective technique

the third eye of shiva

was the sneering repetition of a particular phrase:

“Gonna kill that lady Birch.”

Now, Smidgeon’s desperate fearlessness had understood the essential cowardice of Birch’s nature very clearly. Birch was negligible, a woman, and Smidgeon was going to kill him - and when Smidgeon said he was going to kill someone, you tended to believe him. Birch, terrified by Smidgeon’s accurate understanding of his nature, was reduced to a sniveling wreck - even though he was big enough to have flattened our friend Smidgeon with a single sweep of his mighty arm. The problem for Birch though, was that Smidgeon didn’t know when he was beaten and would have gotten up and gouged at Birch’s eyes; he would have bitten and kicked him too - maybe even hit him over the head with an iron bar if one had been in the vicinity. Birch simply wasn’t up to dealing with that level of commitment. He’d rather surrender and pay obeisance to Smidgeon as his master.

The battle already won, Smidgeon merely administered a light smack over Birch’s head at the end of class. The howling Birch made his escape at a gallop and the triumphant Smidgeon didn’t even deign to chase him. Another potential rival had been put in his place.

Possibly even more humiliating was the humbling of Stanley Evans, a great lump of a boy, who in spite of having no pretensions to combative skill was easily the biggest and strongest boy in the class. Smidgeon determined to put him in his place too. A series of the usual blood-curdling threats issued from the little devil’s mouth and succeeded in reducing poor Evans to a sobbing

wreck in about two minutes. At the end of the woodwork class, Smidgeon hung back a moment in order to give everyone a little fun. The hapless Evans desperately grabbed his bag and hurtled from the room, leaving Smidgeon sniggering behind him. Watching through the window of the woodwork room we were then presented with the pathetic, but undoubtedly amusing, sight of Evans hurtling across the field outside at what seemed about a hundred miles an hour. A great and general roar of laughter rent the air at the sight. Another possible rival had been psyched out. Smidgeon's meanness had completely unmanned the hapless Evans; the very thought of smashing bottles and kicks in the goolies had taken him into areas of human barbarism where he had no experience and was unable to operate. He didn't have Smidgeon's crushed-glass self-conviction.

The pattern was similar with Arnold Cross. A brute of a man with the strength of a gorilla, Smidgeon's mind games reduced him to a bawling jelly sobbing for his mother's help over the course of a single afternoon's football match. Once again, Smidgeon's self-conviction had won through. Maybe Cross would have put up a fight if his mother's life had been at stake (though sometimes I wonder!).

It only remains for me to describe my own little run-in with Smidgeon. Now, I was a rather quiet and unprepossessing youth. Few plaudits could come Smidgeon's way for dealing with me in a dismissive manner. I was way outside the schoolboy 'power circle'; I asked for nothing, gave nothing, and was mostly left alone.

the third eye of shiva

However, I was also considered something of an unpredictable quantity. I had been known to fight, and had even done quite well on occasions, against people with a reputation. Like I say, I was mostly left alone.

On this occasion - a physical education class - I had watched Smidgeon abusing one of my friends in the changing rooms. Vaguely, I began to feel angry. Why did everyone put up with all this shit from Smidgeon? He was a puny guy who would suffer the effects from a hard punch in the mouth just as much as the next man. Suddenly, as if reading my thoughts, Smidgeon turned to me and began to make a few offensive comments. I reached for my towel but Smidgeon was quicker than me and snatched it from my grasp. In that moment I saw red, and drew my arm back with the full intention of dashing it into Smidgeon's mouth. As if in slow motion, I watched his jaw drop in astonishment at this sign of resistance from an unexpected quarter. For a moment my fist hung poised in mid-air, ready to strike, and there was a complete silence in the crowded dressing room. However, after a moment, I let my hand fall to my side and reached instead for the fallen towel. With a sneering laugh, Smidgeon gave me a push before swaggering off, still conqueror of all he surveyed. I hadn't been committed enough to the idea of changing the status quo.

Nevertheless, something had been achieved by my show of potential resistance. Personally, I was left alone by Smidgeon and he never seriously troubled me again. He had realized that I just might, if the circumstances were right, find the level of conviction to challenge him. Of

course, Smidgeon was in no way afraid of me: he just didn't see the point of fighting useless battles. I had no intention of challenging his power status in the class and it was better to let sleeping dogs lie.

Sometimes, when I think back on all those years, I can find something like admiration in my heart for Smidgeon's high levels of self-belief and conviction. On the other hand, he might have been a coward on the battlefield, as his belief in abstracts like 'Queen and Country' wouldn't have been very high. The Smidgeon's of this world can only have total conviction in themselves.

tsunami

*V*eeru Chindavanich was sure that the great waves of destruction that had destroyed everything on the beach in front of Panong in Phuket, Thailand, had been due to the collective bad karma of humanity.

As a young man, Veera had studied these things under a great Buddhist teacher, who had made even the most complex issues appear clear and transparent. There were two kinds of karma: the individual, and the collective. When enough bad karma had been built up on an individual level, some shattering natural disaster would occur to redress the collective balance. The words of his long-since deceased teacher came back to the old fisherman now, and provided him with some cold comfort.

Veera had been fishing near the beach, just a few kilometers up from Panong beach, when the disaster had struck. His survival had been a virtual miracle - or maybe just good karma. First, there had been a titanic rumbling as if the ocean itself was about to split apart - and a few moments later his boat had been sucked viciously out to sea, throwing the old man and his morning's catch into the foaming water. He was sure that he was going to die, but the even greater cataclysm that followed had saved him. A

great tsunami, thirty feet high, had suddenly rushed in, burying him in a wall of water. Seconds later, he had found himself clinging desperately to a small palm tree underwater, lungs bursting for air. Unexpectedly, the great wall of water had suddenly receded and left him stretched out on the beach, already more than half dead.

In spite of his lungs being still filled with salt water, Veera had risen to his feet and staggered further inland with a great wailing mass of humanity all around him. Yes, he had survived, but his two sons, who were also fishermen, had not. At the time that the tsunami had struck, they'd been assiduously casting their nets a kilometer or so further up the coast than their father. All trace of them had been obliterated and their very existence could only now be verified by the old man's failing memory.

The old man was philosophical. He did not doubt that humanity had deserved that great tidal wave of destruction, which had swamped all their little dreams in the purging waters of some infallible judgment. Nevertheless, the pain remained hard to bear - and he was now a miserable creature, alone without wife or children.

The Phuket beachfront had been completely obliterated, sweeping away the numerous holidaymakers who had been enjoying an 'idyllic' beach vacation in the process. The old man shook his head sadly. It was all written in their karma, that they had been in this very place at this very time. Veera knew that most westerners would have regarded his religious beliefs as fantastic at best, and deeply insulting at the worst. There was no arguing with

the third eye of shiva

people who were determined not to see.

The old man had managed to save one foreigner's life, a boy of about five years. As he and the other people had fled from the beachfront in order to avoid a second tsunami wave, the white boy had fallen down on the sand and was scarcely moving as the old man had caught him up in his arms and fled with him to inland safety.

Twenty-four hours ago, he had heard that the boy's parents had died in the first tsunami wave - the very same that had saved the old man's life. Karma. Karma. All was karma.

Now alone in his shock, Veera looked down at the thousand dollars that the American uncle of the boy had given him after collecting the boy. The old man had been sorry to see the boy go and would happily have foregone the thousand-dollar gift in order to keep him, but this too, was karma.

Veera looked up at the tranquil blue sky and a new resolve formed itself in his old bones. He would buy a new fishing boat with this money - and take one of his community's new widows as a bride. Who could tell? Perhaps it was even possible for him to father more children.

the death of zakron

Demetrius was eventually superior to Solaris himself in martial arts and couldn't understand why his great father continued to restrain him from immediately ending his mother Psyche's servitude in the bed of Zakron. Eventually, he determined to put the question to Solaris directly and requested an audience with Solaris in his great sun-palace.

"Oh mighty Solaris, why do we continue to wait? I am already Zakron's superior in fighting skill - and every day we delay condemns my dear mother to another day of hell in Zakron's bed. Let us strike that monstrosity now and end his evil days once and for all."

Solaris listened to Demetrius's words indulgently - but by the time Demetrius had finished, a cloud of concern was clearly etched upon his father's features.

"My son, perhaps you still don't fully understand what is at stake here. This is not just a family squabble between yourself and Zakron. If you should fail this time, the gods themselves will fall - I, Solaris will fall - and Zakron will become the new King of the Universe. There will be no second chance."

Demetrius shuffled his feet uncomfortably. His reply

was full of vehement passion.

“Oh masterful Solaris, how can you even consider my failure? I have trained with single-minded purpose for more than two years now. I have become more than a match for that tyrant, Zakron.”

Solaris looked Demetrius fully in the eyes, before smiling and nodding his head.

“Perhaps you are right my son. You have become a great warrior - and even Zakron himself will need to be wary of you now. But what of your plan? You will need a good one to take Zakron off his guard. I suggest that you first visit the frozen wastes of Mount Glendor and rescue my own beloved Zelda from the block of ice in which I froze her so many aeons ago. Before you meet the Devil in final conflict, place your semen in the beautiful receptacle of Zelda’s body and bring her here to me in Elysium, where she can be protected from the wiles of Zakron. I will ensure that your gift of life brings forth a flower. Do this for me, my son.”

Demetrius looked doubtfully at Solaris. He knew well from everything his mother had told him that Zelda had been Solaris’s favorite. Did he now want her safe from Zakron’s revenge in the event that Demetrius should be slain? At length he spoke - and his countenance was dark as he uttered the words.

“Father, do you believe I will fail in my task of killing Zakron? Do you think that he will still be too strong for me?”

Solaris shook his head and spoke soothingly.

“No Demetrius. You have become a great warrior and

the third eye of shiva

possess a real chance of succeeding in our essential task of killing Zakron. However, the Devil is also a gritty fighter and will not capitulate short of death. It is impossible to predict the result of your combat with certainty. You must thus take the precaution of nurturing your seed prior to the meeting with Zakron. In the event that Zakron is victorious over you, your son - for son it will be, believe me - will survive you, and sixteen or seventeen years from now, Zelda will mate with her child to produce a new race of humans to threaten the Devil. It is merely an insurance policy, Demetrius. Even if you should lose, I, Solaris, your great father, will ensure that you eventually win."

Demetrius still felt unsure about Solaris's response and he remembered his mother, Psyche, telling him often that Solaris's opinions were always subject to his passions. Demetrius felt strongly that the great sun god was not being entirely transparent with him: that there remained some unspoken personal interest in the course of events that he had outlined as desirable. Still, there was also sense in what he had said. The result of a life and death struggle between himself and Zakron would hang on a single thread, and it was certainly a political step to take precautions in case Demetrius was to die as his father, Meteron, had died before him.

"Solaris, your plan is a good one and shall be done. Before killing Zakron, I will rescue the lady Zelda and bring her here to your sun palace, where I will plant the seed for a future race."

Solaris jumped up from his sun throne and advanced towards Demetrius with open arms. He took him in his

embrace and kissed him.

“Go, great Demetrius, and free Zelda. My own mind powers will help you when you reach the pinnacle of Mount Glendor. I will also tell you the secret that will provide you with the greatest protection: Be aware that all you see and experience around the blue glacier is simply a projection of your own mind. If you can see through the illusion, you will be safe. On the other hand, if you should be killed and you believe in your own death, then you will truly die.”

Demetrius thanked Solaris for his aid and immediately took leave of the sun god’s palace. The frozen wastes of Mount Glendor lay far, far distant from Elysium and it would take considerable time for Demetrius to traverse the barren space between.

Zelda had slept within the blue glacier for at least several millennia - ever since Solaris had set her there to prevent any of the other gods from tasting her sweetness. Before her enforced hibernation Zelda had given birth to Zakron, the fierce god-man who now threatened to replace Solaris himself as master of the universe.

At last Demetrius reached the frozen peak of Glendor - and even while he was still some distance away, he could perceive the ice blue light from the glacier containing Zelda. Demetrius glided down and alighted easily next to it. Through the translucent ice block, the horizontal body of the naked Zelda could be clearly discerned. Demetrius had brought along one of Solaris’s heat rods and now he pointed the rod directly at the blue glacier, but before he could switch it on there came the sound of a sudden beating of wings from behind him. A great green wing swept down,

the third eye of shiva

knocking the heat rod from his hand. Demetrius fell to the ground at the force of the blow. As he struggled to retain his senses, a voice spoke. It was the voice of Zakron.

“If it isn’t the stripling Demetrius come to meddle in affairs that are greater than he can understand,” taunted Zakron from a vantage point directly above Demetrius. His great behemoth wings beat the air languidly as he hovered over the helpless body of Psyche’s son.

“Now I am going to kill you once and for all. It is some time since I took home a gift for my whore wife, Psyche. Today, I will take her your head on a silver platter, Demetrius. After that, she will stop resisting me and bear me the son I require.”

The Devil’s words exploded like a bomb inside Demetrius’s head and the desperate need to kill came upon him. Rolling onto his side, he was able to get a full view of Zakron, who hung in the air, taunting him.

“Your time is finished,” shouted Demetrius in a voice filled with fury. “Now, I will cut you down with a single stroke.”

The Devil only laughed all the more robustly at these words. Before Demetrius could rise, Zakron swooped down upon him and his terrible talons swept across Demetrius’s face, leaving it shredded and lacerated.

“Not such a pretty boy now,” mocked the Devil, as he swooped around his prey, looking for a second opening. Demetrius could see nothing of Zakron as blood from his open wounds poured into his eyes. “Now is the time to put you out of your misery once and for all,” snarled Zakron, diving upon the fallen body of Demetrius at high speed.

The terrible talons slashed at the white, open throat of Demetrius and the son of Psyche felt the touch of death upon him.

Suddenly, he recalled the words of Solaris: “Nothing is real around the glacier of Zelda. You will combat only your own inner demons. However, if you are not able to convince yourself of their unreality, the death that will descend upon you will be real enough...”

Even as the dark film of death covered his sight, Demetrius began to intone some words: “Magicians and spirits of the blue glacier, you have no power over me. I am not defeated and I am not dying. I understand that it is you who have infiltrated my mind and planted illusions there. Zakron is not here. I do not bleed. I am not dying. I have come to rescue the beloved of Solaris and I am determined to complete my task. Away with you, black spirits of these nether regions. I am a god myself and come from Solaris. You have no power over me... no power!”

When Demetrius awoke, he was lying in the snow next to the shimmering blue glacier, within which lay the naked body of Zelda. All was quiet and he felt himself strong and whole. He had successfully overcome the first test in his long journey to save Solaris, humanity, and his dear mother, Psyche. On the ground, just a meter or so away from him, lay the heat rod that Solaris had entrusted to him. Demetrius picked it up and pointed it at the glacier a second time. A white light issued forth, bathing the blue glacier in electric brightness. Slowly, ever so very slowly, the ice began to melt. After a few moments, the process quickened and within a period of less than ten minutes, all of the ice had

the third eye of shiva

disappeared. The naked body of Zelda lay stretched out on the icy ground, cushioned by a luxuriant mass of golden hair. For a moment Demetrius thought she was dead, but suddenly she groaned and stretched languidly onto her side. Zelda's blue eyes looked questioningly into the eyes of Psyche's son, and in that very moment he fell. Never before had he seen such loveliness. The mass of golden hair fell sinuously around the perfect breasts and thighs of the exquisitely proportioned body, while the deep blue eyes were like an eternal sea. The man-god Demetrius gaped in open awe at the human's naked perfection and Zelda, noting the effect she had already exerted on Psyche's son, smiled, igniting a thousand supplicant fires in her savior's breast.

At length, Zelda spoke.

"Who is the man or god that has released me from the glacial sleep ordained by great Solaris himself?"

Demetrius could hardly respond to Zelda's question, so deep was his confusion and, yes, his love. At last he managed to respond.

"Great Zelda, unique love of masterful Solaris himself, my name is Demetrius and I have set you free on the order of the King of the Universe. Great events are in motion, and the son you bore through your union with Solaris threatens the order of the cosmos. The mighty lord of existence has given me this task of freeing you and now we must return together to his great sun palace in Elysium, where you will hear about the next stage of his plan to defeat the odious Zakron."

While Demetrius had been talking, Zelda had taken the

opportunity to make a minute examination of the man-god who had saved her. She was favorably impressed by the external qualities of the young Adonis who stood before her. As Demetrius finished his short explanation, Zelda smiled.

“It all sounds just fine to me, handsome. Let’s get going before I catch a death of cold. I’m freezing my butt off here.”

Zakron was displeased. He’d heard about his mother’s escape from her icy tomb and he realized that the freshly trained Demetrius posed a real threat to him and to his plans for replacing Solaris as King of the Universe. Last time, he had defeated Demetrius only by the skin of his teeth - and since that occasion the boy had acquired all the wily battle skills of Solaris himself. Yes... it was going to be difficult. He looked across to where Psyche, his own wife and Demetrius’s mother, lay idly on a cloud of gold and bared his ugly fangs.

“You shouldn’t feel complacent about your son’s rescue of my dear mother, Psyche. A little bird informs me that Solaris is just as lustful as ever and already feels overwhelming jealousy to Demetrius for intending to start a new race of men with Zelda. Do you really believe that he’ll allow Demetrius to taste what was always denied to all the other Gods - even to his own brothers?”

Psyche smiled - more a smirk than a smile, really. When she spoke her voice was strong and authoritative.

the third eye of shiva

“Zakron, Solaris’s fear of your own power-mad ambition is much greater than any jealousy he might feel towards Demetrius. My son will lie with Zelda just long enough to create a child. After that, Zelda will be Solaris’s for evermore.”

Zakron laughed unpleasantly.

“I think you are very naïve, Psyche. Certainly, Solaris will be waiting to repossess Zelda for a long time if she takes as long to conceive as you do!”

Psyche laughed almost gaily.

“My dear monstrosity... Solaris has approved their union, which is blessed with every fair augury. Compare that with our own frigid relationship. I am held here in your cursed castle against my will. Your physical presence disgusts me, and given the chance, I would throttle any child at birth that was a product of our coupling.”

The Devil shook his head wryly.

“I am well protected against your desperation, Psyche. If a child issues forth from your womb he will immediately be separated from his bloodthirsty mother. The real problem is that you appear to be completely infertile. I have almost given up all hope of you ever becoming a mother again.”

Psyche said nothing, but smiled sweetly. The smile appeared to infuriate Zakron more than any answer possibly could have. He began to scream obscenities at Psyche. His anger unassuaged, he rose up from his majestic gold-encrusted throne and approached his unwilling wife with both fists tightly clenched.

Solaris was deeply distressed at the realization that his own beloved Zelda had fallen deeply in love with Demetrius. He understood the importance of defeating Zakron and beginning a new race of acolytes that would support the present status quo under all circumstances, but in his heart of hearts he began to hate Demetrius because of Zelda's love for him. However, he did not oppose their union and even blessed it with many beneficent sunrays, which virtually guaranteed that their union would result in a male child. When everything was secure and Zelda pregnant with Demetrius's baby, Solaris called Psyche's son into his presence.

"O great Demetrius, the first half of your task has been completed with Zelda's pregnancy. Now you must complete the second half by killing Zakron and setting free your mother, Psyche."

Demetrius nodded his head with deliberation.

"O great and wise Solaris, I am ready for the task at hand. That abomination of nature that has killed my father and raped my mother will not escape my vengeance this time."

Solaris nodded, seemingly pleased with Demetrius's answer.

"Spoken like a great and wise man, Demetrius. The time has now come for you to challenge Zakron once again. You are infinitely better prepared for battle than you were the last time. The Devil is aware of your success with Zelda and of the fact that you now represent a fundamental threat

the third eye of shiva

to his plans for universal domination. He certainly will not underestimate you.”

“I will prove myself the better man - and god,” replied Demetrius with conviction.

Solaris rose from his great sun throne and spoke to Demetrius in regal tones.

“Then go, Demetrius. No time is better for your vengeance than now. Remember all that I have taught you and you will surely prevail against Zakron and save your beloved mother, Psyche.”

Demetrius gave Solaris a sun salute.

“Great father, I go - and I will not return until my noble task has been completed. Zakron will die this day!”

Zakron watched Demetrius's journey into the fire zone carefully on the all-seeing eye in his banquet hall. The Devil was unsure whether to go out to meet his enemy or to fight a defensive battle from within his great fortress. Last time, he'd won a narrow offensive victory. On balance, he decided that it was better to let the stripling Demetrius come to him this time. Why take unnecessary risks? Let the fool exhaust himself before being annihilated once and for all.

Demetrius approached the flaming walls of Zakron's castle at great speed and easily passed over the unguarded walls. At the entrance to the banquet hall a great red dragon hovered menacingly in the air, spitting fire and salivating hot lava. The battle took just a few moments. Demetrius severed the dragon's head with his great axe before passing

on into the banquet hall itself. Here, he discovered the Devil at the far end of the hall - holding a knife to Psyche's throat.

"Son of Meteron," began Zakron, "I am afraid that you have not learnt your basic lesson: that you will never defeat me! This time I will kill you, and your barren mother also."

In this extreme situation, Demetrius borrowed Solaris's power of invisibility and began to creep ever closer to Zakron. When he was just a few feet away, the watching Solaris decided to place Psyche's son at the Devil's mercy, pulling away the cloak of invisibility that had protected Demetrius.

The Devil laughed outright.

"You see how much that concupiscent old fool Solaris loves you and your mother, Demetrius? He will sacrifice you both in order to keep Zelda only for himself."

Demetrius understood that he'd been betrayed and steeled himself for Zakron's attack. It wasn't long in coming. Psyche was pushed unceremoniously to one side as the Devil became invisible and began to creep up on Demetrius's left. A warrior instinct informed Demetrius that the Devil would approach him on his weaker side and his great sword cut a great arch through the air on his left side. The Devil screamed as Demetrius's sword ripped through his mid-riff and the green, oily blood flowed out of his body and onto the shining banquet room floor.

His brain befuddled with pain, Zakron swept forward and buried his fangs in Demetrius's throat. It seemed that this time both combatants were destined to die - for the Devil had already been mortally wounded by Demetrius's

the third eye of shiva

sword - but it was at this juncture that Psyche, Demetrius's mother, crept up from behind and buried the silver dagger that she always carried about her person between Zakron's shoulders. The Devil screamed, and after a moment the fangs released their grip on Demetrius's throat as Zakron slipped slowly to the floor - already dead.

Psyche performed a healing mind-extension probe and discovered that her son's wounds were not fatal and she was able to dry the blood and to close them. Demetrius blinked at the scene around him. Zakron lay dead in a pool of his own green blood and his mother lay weeping as she cradled her son's head in her bosom.

"Solaris betrayed us," gasped Demetrius as he lay in his mother's arms.

"Yes," replied Psyche somberly. "We must return quickly to Elysium and ensure that no harm comes to Zelda. I fear that Solaris will now stop at nothing to ensure that your seed bears no fruit."

Solaris was aware of Demetrius's success against Zakron and he knew that the wrathful mother and son would be in Elysium shortly, demanding an explanation for his betrayal. Time was short, and Zelda's seed must be destroyed before their arrival but she was nowhere to be found! Solaris immediately suspected the hand of his own brother, Xenias, who had lusted after Zelda in the past and had always hated him. He immediately summoned Xenias to his sun palace.

As soon as he arrived, Xenias was ordered into Solaris's

throne room, where the Lord of the Universe wasted no time in upbraiding him.

“Xenias, I will ask you this only once. Where is Zelda?”

Solaris’s brother was forthright and angry in his response.

“Old man, you no longer deserve the title of “King of the Gods”. You have proved yourself to be foolish and shallow. Let the mantle pass to a younger being – one who is uncorrupted by all your deceit and selfish intrigues. I hold the woman Zelda for Demetrius, who has the youth and vigor to take over your role as Lord of the Universe. I and the other Gods are too old, and we are also implicated in your brutal, failed regime. The time of the ‘Man-Gods’ has come.”

Solaris jumped from his throne and screamed for the arrest of his brother, Xenias, but nobody paid any attention. The inhabitants of Elysium were aware that Solaris’s time had passed.

A week later, Demetrius, Psyche and Zelda celebrated Demetrius’s enthronement as King of the Universe. All the powers of Solaris were passed to Demetrius with the approval of the other gods. Solaris was imprisoned inside a block of ice on the summit of Mount Glendor, destined to the eternal sleep that he had planned for Zelda. It was arranged that after the birth of their boy, Zelda would quickly become pregnant a second time - but on this occasion with a girl. When they became of age, the brother and sister would multiply and a

the third eye of shiva

new race of man-gods would inhabit the empty world, and even Elysium itself. Psyche, Demetrius's mother, was declared eternal Queen of the Universe, and Zelda its perpetual princess.

Demetrius's vengeance was complete.

the lost city

*T*he massive tsunami had engulfed the coastlines of the Indian Ocean, killing about 250 000 people in the process. In a single moment, it had demonstrated the awesome destructive powers of a nature that could still obliterate huge numbers of human beings like tiny ants, notwithstanding all of man's much vaunted scientific knowledge. What would we do if another meteorite were to hit our planet, the size of the one that destroyed the dinosaurs more than 65 million years ago? Simply: we would die and become extinct, exactly as the dinosaurs had done so long ago.

Amongst all the terrible destruction and loss of life caused by the tsunami, one useful discovery was made - thanks to the ocean taking back about ten miles of Indian coastline and ripping away half of the earth on the coastline that remained. The brutal force of nature had uncovered an ancient city, about a hundred miles down from Madras, which had probably lain undiscovered, so the experts opined, for at least 3000 years. Some scientists and archaeologists arriving early on the scene quickly discovered that the city had been called 'Marharbatum' and, astonishingly, had possessed an advanced drainage

system, around 150 kilometers of road, and buildings akin to our modern skyscrapers - at least forty floors high!

In haste the Indian government assembled an international team of experts to study the ancient city in more detail. The famous Mesopotamian archaeologist, Ebenezer Slocombe, was chosen to head the team of some twenty experts. His deputy was Dileep Viswanath, an authority on ancient Hindu archaeology. The rest of the group was truly international, representing some fourteen countries from every corner of the globe.

On the first day, amazing new discoveries were made. An aluminum car was unearthed. It seemed designed to run on the sunken road; but on further examination was observed to be without any mode of propulsion. Dileep Viswanath suggested that the vehicle might have been designed to run on solar power, as the rear part of the 'car' still showed evidence of a concave metal disc, possibly a means to utilize the energy of the sun. However, his ideas did not find much support among the other members of the team. Subsequent to this find, a Greek archaeologist entered into a large dome-shaped building which was found to possess an impressive array of advanced high-tech equipment. After half a day of study it was confirmed that this dome-shaped edifice had been a control center for silos of surface-to-air missiles. Twenty-four hours later, the titanium silos themselves were found nearby - though empty of missiles. By this time it was clear that a momentous discovery had been made that was going to fundamentally change our present view of human history.

About a week after the team's first arrival, Slocombe

the third eye of shiva

and Viswanath held a meeting with some of their senior colleagues to consider what had been discovered and how the hidden knowledge of Marharbatum might aid man in the present.

Ebenezer Slocombe was the first to speak.

“Gentlemen, Marharbatum is destined to turn on its head all our hitherto most certain ideas about the progress of human history. It can now be stated as a fact that an advanced civilization existed here, on the eastern coast of India, a thousand years before the Christian era began. We have discovered roads, vehicles that were probably propelled by solar power, the foundations of forty-floor buildings, and even advanced weapons systems. The most immediate question that comes to mind, is what it was that led to all of this advanced knowledge being lost subsequent to the destruction of Marharbatum around three thousand years ago?

In order to answer this question, we must discover what cataclysmic event destroyed this city. Early signs appear to indicate a violent end to the advanced civilization that lived here and, of course, that gives rise to an even more interesting question: Was Marharbatum destroyed by another civilization even more powerful and technologically advanced than itself? If the answer should prove to be yes, we then need to consider why any trace of this mighty civilization has also disappeared from the human record.”

There was silence in the large tent that had been erected in the midst of the ruins of Marharbatum as Professor Slocombe paused and looked questioningly from

face to face. At last Dileep Viswanath spoke.

“We have legends in India that speak of an advanced civilization that once existed on the east coast of the Indian sub-continent. According to these legends, those people were even capable of flying, and traveling to the stars. Of course, no able scientist ever took those stories seriously... until now.”

Professor Slocombe and the other scientists looked interested in Dileep Viswanath's words, but the Indian appeared reluctant to say more. Clearly, he had always considered these stories fables and he was now having trouble coming to terms with the idea that at least one part of the legend had surely been true. He paused for a few seconds, appearing lost in his own calculations, but the learned Indian psychologist then resumed.

“In these stories - fables, as I had always thought - the advanced civilization on the east coast of India was eventually destroyed by a missile attack from another advanced people living somewhere in present day Arabia. It is said that these missiles exploded at some distance above the city, pouring forth chemicals that were deadly to the people living here, but which left the structures of the city itself intact.”

Werter Fassbender, a chemist from Munich, broke in excitedly at this point.

“Why, the concept is remarkably similar to one currently being developed by the United States: a bomb that will kill the people in a city, while leaving all the man-made structures intact!”

Professor Slocombe nodded his head grimly.

the third eye of shiva

“Yes, it has often been said that there is nothing new under the sun, and here we have the irrefutable proof of that maxim’s wisdom. We must continue our examination of Marharbatum in order to discover new clues concerning exactly what happened here more than three thousand years ago.”

The exacting work continued steadily over the next few days and more new discoveries were made. First, Professor Slocombe and a couple of Indian helpers unearthed a great metal tube which, on deeper investigation, seemed to be part of a giant radio telescope of the kind used in deep space exploration. A day later, Werter Fassbender and his team were able to give a chemical analysis of the substances they had scraped off the city ruins, which confirmed that the city had experienced a sudden and vast pollution by radioactive materials. The conclusion was clear: Marharbatum had been destroyed by a bomb or bombs, which had polluted the city with radioactivity while leaving the buildings intact. The city had subsequently been left to rot as a radioactive wasteland, falling into its present ruinous condition.

About a week after the start of the exploration, Professor Slocombe was dusting off some utensils that had probably been used for cooking when the intense heat of the afternoon sun suddenly made him feel dizzy. He had been standing in a large, rectangular ruin - which had probably been used as a vast kitchen - with the sun beating down on his head when suddenly he was overwhelmed with weariness. Professor Slocombe tried to reach the shadowy cover of a nearby wall, but fatigue overcame him

long before he could. He sank into unconsciousness on the level plain in front of him.

“Squadron leaders, now is the time. Attack. Attack. Attack.” Slocombe’s own voice sounded strangely in his ears. He knew that he had an important mission to complete, and yet at the same time, deep in the back of his mind, he also knew that he was the Professor Slocombe who’d been leading the team excavating Marharbatum, but this inner realization was distant and confused. In the present moment he was mostly aware that he had a most important mission to complete.

He was flying as part of a great aerial formation of perhaps one hundred rocket-propelled craft. Below, he could see the glittering outlines of a dull, metallic looking city: Marharbatum. However, this was a Marharbatum very different to the one he had been excavating earlier that day. It was now a living entity and great spires and towers stretched up to the sky. As the great fleet of flying craft whirled around the city, Slocombe calmly observed the ferocious fire points of the anti-aircraft fire from below. In the very moment he observed this, the plane next to his wingtip burst into flames and plunged like a stricken bird down to the inhospitable city below.

“Careful,” Slocombe heard himself screaming into the radio set. Another two or three planes followed the first casualty down as the great mass of flying machines whirled in a circle around the exposed city like densely packed groups of migrating birds.

“Here we go,” shouted Slocombe and he pulled a lever even as his machine swooped over the city. There

the third eye of shiva

was a great red flash below and then he was clear. As he looked back, he saw flying vehicle after flying vehicle repeating the angled gradient of his own swoop and a myriad of red flashes covered the helpless city as the pilots unloaded their deadly cargo. Slocombe began to loop round the city once again, but it quickly became clear to him that another pass would not be necessary: the gunfire from below had already ceased.

“Well done, my fedeli. That was a job well done. The resistance of Marharbatum to our triumphant empire has been ended once and for all. Let us now return home.” From whence these words came, Slocombe could not at first fathom. After a while it dawned on him that the words he had heard had issued from his own lips.

The great formation of birdlike machines traveled westwards from Marharbatum over an endless horizon of unchanging desert. After an hour, a great stretch of blue ocean came into view, and some twenty minutes later the luscious coastline of a tropical landmass was reached. The flying machines immediately began to descend towards a great white city built along a part of the coastline below. Once again, and in the distance, Slocombe heard himself speak.

“Thank you for your faith and support this day, my fedeli. Now we can rest forever more.”



The German, Werter Fassbender, found Professor Slocombe's body some half hour later. Slocombe had suffered a heart attack

Jon Aristides

while working in the stifling heat of the afternoon sun, and though he'd attempted to get into the protective shade offered by a nearby wall, he had died several meters short of the inviting shadow. The strangest part of the tragic incident was the scrap of penciled notepaper he was found clutching in his dead left hand. The pencil he had used lay next to his fallen body. The words on the notepaper baffled the entire team. They read:

Have faith. I am the one... Marbarbatum is no more.

*if only I'd remembered my
stuzzicadente*

-or-

love is beautiful

*H*ave you ever been really tired of someone close to you? So tired of a person that you wanted to kill them? Yes...? Me too. In fact I did it. Killed them, I mean. Killed *her* I mean. How did it happen you ask? Well, just let me narrate the bare facts - only the facts, mind! - and then you can tell me if I did well or badly.

It was ten o' clock at night and we were sitting together in the lounge in front of the fire. When I say 'we' I mean Esmerelda and I. Esmerelda was my wife. I say *was* because I killed her and she is no longer living. As such, I am a widow and no longer a husband. Esmerelda only continues to exist as a memory in the minds of those who knew her before she ceased to be. Foremost among these people, would be myself. Both Esmy's parents are deceased, so it is only a few friends and me that remember her as she was before she stopped living. Before I killed

her.

It was a peaceful and easy death. I would never make her suffer in the way that she made me suffer. No! It was one short, sharp shock, and sweet - and goodbye Esmy, forever more. Or at least until we meet again in hell. That's really the only place she could end up. I guess that I'd possessed more hopeful circumstances until I killed her. Now I suppose I'll be going along there too. Yet another reason I have to hate you, Esmy.

It all happened very suddenly. We'd been talking of this and of that, when suddenly Esmy came straight out with it and demanded a divorce.

"Nick, I don't love you anymore and I want a divorce so I can marry Alan."

Now Alan was my best friend, unmarried, and apparently lacking all interest in women. I had always thought that he was gay and secretly loved me. Just goes to show how very wrong you can be sometimes. I recognize that it was egotism on my part to assume that I knew him so well. It's easy to get into the way of thinking that everyone loves you. Mum and Dad loved me, Esmy loved me - and poor Alan loved me as well. I was wrong in thinking as I did. I know that now. But it took Esmy's death to clarify my mind.

I was shocked when I heard Esmy say those words. More than shocked - I was angry: deeply angry. So angry that I wanted to jump out of my chair, punch her in the face, and then put my hands around her throat and begin to slowly squeeze. However, I did nothing of the sort. Not just then, anyway. I coughed and tried to answer in a way

the third eye of shiva

that I thought was neutral, indifferent even.

“Why don’t you love me anymore, Esmey?”

Esmey smiled whimsically.

“You’re such a terrible wimp, Nick. I want a real man to look after my needs.”

“And Nick is a real man?” I asked incredulously.

Esmey began to giggle. To *giggle*.

“Well, at least he can satisfy my desire more often than you, Nick,” replied Esmey more seriously.

“But Esmey, I thought you *loved* me. Have I been so totally mistaken in my perceptions?”

Esmey sighed, like a woman who knew that she was coming to the unpleasant part.

“I am fond of you, Nick. It’s just that you’re not hacking it in bed anymore. Alan is rather better than you in this respect.”

“So you’ve been sleeping with him?” I asked redundantly.

“Oh yes, indeed,” replied Esmey with nonchalance - and I began to feel my blood boil.

“So you have betrayed me?” I enquired, very quietly.

Esmey seemed surprised.

“Well, yes... but I hardly thought you’d care. After all, Alan told me you’re gay... and my experience pointed in the same direction.”

It was at this point that a blind rage descended upon me. Yet it wasn’t blind at all. Suddenly, I saw everything very clearly - and most clearly of all, I saw the need for Esmey to die. It was her karma, and I was her karmic punisher!

With a single scream, I bounded out of my chair and slapped the unfaithful bitch across the face with vigorous force. Esmy never had time to speak before my hands were around her pretty neck and squeezing. As I watched her eyes bulge and become bloodshot, I felt like a man in a dream, but a persistent voice inside my head told me that Esmy deserved to die for her terrible crimes. She had been a wife and yet had chosen to break and invalidate that sacred trust. My honor had been besmirched and it was for me to take it back with my own two hands.

I continued to squeeze Esmy's throat for about three minutes, by which time I could see from her lolling tongue, bulging eyes, and strange expression of sad contentment, that she was dead. I withdrew my hands and Esmy's body lurched to the left. Seeing her poor lifeless cadaver lolling like a scarecrow's in the big leather armchair, I was unable to stop myself from bursting into tears. Life was a bitch - and so was Esmy.

Maybe you can guess the conclusion to this little morality tale? I called the police, told them what I had done, and waited calmly for them to arrive, holding Esmy's lifeless hand in mine. However, that is not what happened. First, I decided that I should shoot myself and went searching for my gun. For some reason I was unable to find it (had Esmy intended to shoot me if I'd refused to divorce her?). Then, while I was coming down the stairs after the futile search, my foot slipped on the carpet and I went crashing down to the bottom. I'm sure that I passed out for a while. After an indeterminate period of time, my eyes blinked open, and I was in my bed with Esmy lying

the third eye of shiva

next to me, her arms embracing my middle. She was fast asleep, and I realized with an impulse of lively pleasure that I'd been dreaming.

Love is beautiful.

the subjugation of the beast

*Z*enios and Xothon were frightened. They had been traveling on the bleak desert plains for hours and dusk was close. All day they had advanced warily, spears at the ready - and on at least two occasions roving lions and tigers had approached. On the second occasion, a pack of around seven saber-tooths had sent them scrambling up a rare palm tree, where they'd remained for two hours with the tigers snarling and leaping below before wearying of the game and slinking off sulkily. Darkness followed shortly after and the two humans were condemned to an uncomfortable night in the tree in order to avoid being eaten before dawn. Zenios was cleaner than Xothon and had to put up with his putrid stink all through the night. In irritation, he smacked Xothon across the mouth and motioned to another branch, making his will quite clear to the weaker man. Obediently, Xothon slithered on to the other branch, whimpering softly.

Zenios had been the strongest hominid in the pack before being betrayed by a triumvirate of resolute rivals. He'd been expelled from the tribe and condemned to a life of scavenging hardship, with only the weakling, Xothon, to keep him company. Xothon had been banished on the

same day as Zenios, but for very different reasons. Xothon was weak and sickly and quite useless as a hunter-gatherer. The pack had no use for weaklings. Zenios had consented to Xothon accompanying him, as even his great strength feared the absolute loneliness of the desolate plains. Now though, around a month after their banishment, he had wearied of Xothon's presence - to the point where he was seriously considering eating him. Meat was scarce, and Xothon would provide Zenios with a good meal at a difficult time. The question had almost been resolved in Zenios's head, and tomorrow would probably be Xothon's last.

Their former tribe had experimented with cooking dead flesh on volcanic rock, thus making it more palatable and easy to eat, but this had necessitated their staying in the vicinity of the volcanic rocks. The secrets of making heat were still unknown - or at least they had been unknown until a few months ago, when certain members of the tribe claimed to have discovered the secret of making fire: rub sticks together under a pile of dry leaves and branches. It seemed an unlikely procedure to Zenios, but tomorrow he would try it out just in case - and in the unlikely event that it proved successful, Zenios would enjoy some very welcome roasted flesh.

It wasn't as if Xothon provided Zenios with any real companionship. Most of the day he just sniveled and cried, leaving Zenios to do all the hard work. Better that Xothon should contribute and become useful to his tribe (in this case, Zenios) rather than be a perpetual burden. Yes, let him sleep now, Zenios was sure that tomorrow would be

the third eye of shiva

his companion's last.

At first dawn the two humans, still lithe and loose-limbed like their hominid relatives in the mammal family, slithered down the tree and on to the desolate plain, where the weather was still cool and refreshing. In just a couple of hours the sun would heat the sands to an uncomfortable temperature, and by noon further travel would be impossible - at least until later in the day. Zenios decided that now was the right time to take his special meal. Xothon was bent double, examining the marks made by the saber-teeth in the sand around the tree. He seemed preoccupied with something approaching thought and didn't appear to hear Zenios's stealthy approach from behind him, spear in hand. In just a moment it was over. Zenios thrust his spear into Xothon's back with all his force and his erstwhile companion on this enforced trek fell to the ground with only the softest of grunts to indicate that life had fled away and he was as dead as a stone.

Zenios collected dry leaves and sticks from the tree and its environs, watching for potential predators at the same time. At last he was done and the dismembered body of Xothon lay at his side (cut into pieces with sharp stones). It would probably be necessary to eat it raw, as always, but Zenios was determined to try the technique he had heard about for tenderizing the tough meat. He selected two small branches from the tree and began to rub them together vigorously under the pile of dry leaves he had collected. He silently rubbed the two pieces of wood together for about five minutes, but nothing happened. Zenios redoubled his efforts, and after fifteen minutes

some wisps of smoke began to appear and he started to feel the heat. Desperately, he rubbed the sticks together even harder - and finally a single flare slithered across the bottom of the pile of leaves, igniting the bundle into flame.

Due to his strenuous endeavors, Zenios had failed to observe the approach of two hungry lions on his blind side. At the sight and sound of the crackling flames, the lions roared and became uncertain in their approach. Zenios glanced round and quickly noticed the discomfiture of the beasts in the presence of the fire. He immediately thrust one of the sticks he'd used for the kindling into the fire and watched it ignite into flames. Clutching the bottom of it tightly, Zenios turned in the direction of the uncertain lions. They crouched, around ten meters from him, watching the flaming stick, seemingly mesmerized. Zenios swept the burning stick in an arch through the air - and to his joy, saw the two lions cower and begin to move backwards. Cautiously he moved forward, sweeping the flaming stick from side to side - and with a last roar of frustration and fear the two lions turned and fled. He had never known such a thing before. Lions and Tigers did not fear humans and their puny weapons. Any man caught far from a tree had no more chance than a wildebeest or wild pig of avoiding the fate of becoming the predator's next meal. Now these mighty hunters had run away from Zenios - and all because of the flaming stick he'd held in his hand. The lions had feared him; there was no doubt about that. Perhaps fire would prove itself to have multiple uses in the survival of man in this hostile world...

Zenios threw the stick back on to the now freely

the third eye of shiva

burning pile of leaves and sticks. It seemed that the flames would soon consume themselves - and there wouldn't be any further fuel to sustain it. The man who had created fire needed to act quickly. Picking up the second stick with which he had created the flames, Zenios plunged the sharpest end into one of Xothon's hairy hands. He picked it up and began to wave it back and forth over the flames.

An hour later a full and contented Zenios lay lazily on the desert sand looking at the last dying embers of the fire he had made. A few scattered bones lay around as silent testimony to Zenios's first meal cooked with fire. Now he would sleep until the late afternoon, when further travel might be possible. With a sudden rush of fear he noted that the lions would probably return with the expiration of the fire - and there was not enough material to create another one. As if on cue, several angry roars rent the morning's stillness. With an angry grunt, Zenios lurched to his feet and shinned up the tree that would provide him with safety, like the dumb animal he had been, and still remained.

the city of mirrors

*A*s we glided down to the level Martian surface, I saw it, but still couldn't believe it. It was a great city - with towering pinnacles and flashing angles - made entirely of glass. Or rather, mirrors. It shimmered translucently in the late afternoon sunshine.

Our blasters fired and we descended softly onto the red desert sands below. There were just two of us inside the landing capsule, *Christopher Columbus 3*. "Red" Jeb Benson, the finest engineer I'd ever worked with, and myself - Jason Dean, Colonel in the U.S. Air Force and captain of this first manned mission to Mars.

After we'd landed safely and completed all of the necessary procedures I looked across at Jeb questioningly.

"What did you think of that huge glass city that we saw while we were coming down?"

Red gave me a hard stare and shook his head.

"Sure didn't see nothing like that. Wouldn't be likely to forget it if I had."

I wasn't too surprised by Red's words - he'd been preoccupied with landing duties at the time that I'd spied the city from the observation panel of our landing module.

"It should be right behind us. We'll see it just as soon

as we get out and begin to move around.”

The strange thing was that when we actually walked down the steps of the landing module and became the first men to walk on the surface of Mars, we saw nothing but an unending red desert that stretched off in all directions for as far as the eye could see.

I was frankly incredulous at not finding the enormous city that I'd viewed from the sky. Red, naturally enough, believed that I'd been the victim of some kind of hallucination brought on by the sunlight reflecting off the smooth metal contours of our landing module. For a moment, I too began to doubt the reality of what I'd seen, but I'd been carefully trained not to make basic conceptual errors - and this had clearly been a city.

“You need to take it easy, Jason. This trip hasn't been a cake walk and we're both living on our nerves a little.”

What Red said was certainly true. Almost every minor thing that could go wrong had done so during our journey from Earth to Mars. In the end, we'd made it to the red planet by the skin of our teeth. The most serious problem that we'd faced had been the non-functioning of our automatic landing computer during our descent. It had been necessary to fly the module down manually.

We had several scientific experiments to perform on the Martian surface, but after a couple of hours of meticulous research I asked Red if he'd help me to unload the Mars buggy so we could take a more extensive look around. It wasn't long before we were trundling over the red desert sands at an average speed of around 15 kilometers per hour.

the third eye of shiva

We headed off in the direction in which I thought I'd seen the city, but for forty minutes we found nothing. Eventually, however, we came in sight of something quite amazing: a quick-running fresh-water stream! We had found flowing water on a planet where there was not supposed to be any. Red looked at me in a frankly incredulous manner.

"Are we seeing things, Jason? Everyone knows that any water that might have existed on Mars has been dried up for millennia."

"Looks like we're going to have to revise our opinion about that, Red," I replied. "And where there is water, there may also be a city - and people!"

We agreed that our best course of action was to follow the river as far as we could, hopefully to its source. As things turned out we didn't need to travel more than five kilometers before we came to a place where the river broadened out into a great lake. The huge sheet of water stretched out before us; so still that it made me think of a mirror once again. Only the desert sands surrounded the great sheet of water.

Red shook his head incredulously again.

"I don't understand any of this. How can there be a river and a lake on Mars, when there shouldn't be either?"

"I can't answer that question," I replied slowly. "But I'm betting that this unexpected find of water is in some way connected with what I thought I saw as we were descending to the surface. Let's take a look around and see if we can find anything else."

My heart was beating fast as we began to circle the

shore of the lake. I felt certain that we were about to make a discovery, and my intuition didn't let me down. We'd been driving around the rock-strewn lakeside for about twenty minutes when the buggy suddenly crashed forcibly against something. It overturned and sent us sprawling into the red desert sand.

For perhaps five minutes we lay there motionless, all the breath from our bodies completely gone. At last I staggered to my feet and looked at where the buggy lay upended. There was no impediment to be seen in front of it! The desert sands continued to stretch on ahead in a seemingly unending red blanket - and yet we had surely been upended by brutal contact with a very solid body. I stepped over to where the buggy lay and attempted to walk on a few paces ahead. I say 'attempted' because as soon as I came up parallel with the buggy, I found all further forward movement impeded by some kind of invisible wall.

Red blinked at me from the red desert sands where he still lay.

"What the hell is going on?" he asked, shaking his head in a bewildered fashion. I had the first glimmerings of an idea that might throw some light on the mystery confronting us.

"I have a crazy idea that the city I saw as we were descending is standing here, right before us, but for some reason we can't see it..."

Suddenly, in the distance, I spotted a moving speck in the sky traveling towards us at an incredible speed. Try to imagine my amazement when the speck came nearer and I

the third eye of shiva

perceived it to be a man-like creature flying towards us! He had a silver helmet with wings on it and also small wings on his feet. Beyond the helmet, he wore nothing except a loincloth. His sleek, muscular body seemed to glisten in the late afternoon Martian sunshine as he slowly descended to the ground in front of us. He had a look of displeasure on his noble features.

Having regained solid ground, he directed certain remarks at us that had the tone of a question, but I wasn't able to understand a word. To my great amazement, Red replied in the same strange language!

"What the hell is going on?" I shouted back towards Red, who still lay stretched out on the Martian sands.

"He's speaking ancient Greek," Red replied quickly. "My family is Greek and I still know the language. Modern Greek isn't so different from ancient forms."

"That's all fine and dandy," I replied rather abruptly, "but why is he speaking ancient Greek on Mars - and what the hell did he say anyway?"

"He asked us what we are doing here and where we have come from."

"And what did you tell him?"

"I told him that we are from Earth on a mission of exploration to Mars - the truth."

At this point, the new arrival began to talk in a more measured manner than previously and I could see that Red was listening to his words attentively. The narration in Greek continued for about five minutes before the helmeted newcomer paused and looked to Red, making a motion of his hand in an unmistakable sign for him to

translate.

Red shook his head and looked at me in a bewildered fashion.

“Well, you’re not going to believe this,” Red began, “but he says that he is the Greek god called Hermes and that he and the other gods of antiquity live here with their king, Zeus. This place we just bumped into is actually their palace, and they all live inside it. He says that the whole pantheon decided to leave Earth for Mars after the Roman world, and humanity in general, rejected them for the new religion of Christianity. It seems that they were disgusted with the ingratitude of man and hoped to forget his existence here on Mars. In these circumstances, our friend Hermes is obviously not too pleased to see us here disturbing their peace.”

I laughed. I really couldn’t help it. I’d never heard such a lot of hogwash spoken in a serious way.

“If you’re not putting me on Red, and that’s really what this clown said, then you can see as well as me that it’s all nonsense and hot air.”

Red shook his head thoughtfully.

“No, I really think that he’s telling us the truth. He wants us to go and have an audience with his great leader, Zeus, King of the Gods.”

Once again, I had to laugh.

“Zeus, King of the Gods! I guess he’s taking us to Mount Olympus in Greece!”

Red smiled ruefully and I wearily made a motion signaling that we should follow the joker who called himself Hermes. He’d been observing us both attentively

the third eye of shiva

while he hovered about six feet above the desert sands. When he saw my gesture and Red start forward, he gave a quick smile and began to fly slowly on ahead.

Suddenly, in front of the invisible barrier we had been unable to pass, Hermes disappeared. We followed him and passed straight through this time, to the place that lay beyond.

On the other side of the wall, we found ourselves in a great reception room with a dinner table at its center. An impressive old man with a beard sat at the head of the table awaiting us. The other places were empty, but two seats, one on either side of the old man, were laid out. Hermes motioned us forward and the impressive looking old man rose to greet us.

“Hello, my dear friends,” he began cordially. “Ever since our self-imposed exile from Earth I have always been aware that one day humans would follow us here. That day has now come - and it means that your civilization has advanced considerably in the time since we left. However, your new proximity also means that we must now search out another retreat, for you would never again accept us as your superiors. Violence would be inevitable.”

I glanced at my companion, who seemed thunderstruck by the words he had heard. By the use of some strange power, the old man was communicating with us in English. He suggested, in an imperious manner that brooked no contradiction, that we sit down with him and take our lunch.

After we had been eating for about ten minutes, Zeus, if that was really who he was, commenced his story. He

told us of a race of intergalactic travelers who'd roamed all over the universe, and for a short time had made Earth their home. The people of that time had thought them gods when they had set up their home in the secluded valleys of Mount Olympus in Greece. The human form had so pleased the travelers that they had adopted it definitively for themselves, although they'd maintained their ability to change their appearance at will. When they had been finally rejected by the human race in favor of Christianity, they had decided to establish their home on the red planet, Mars.

Now we had arrived as the harbingers of an unpleasant truth: man would soon be colonizing Mars. The Olympians had two choices: to return to Earth one final time in order to destroy its inhabitants utterly, or to leave the solar system and seek their home elsewhere. Zeus concluded his story with a question: Which choice did we think that they, the Olympians, should make?

After a moment of silence, I spoke. I told Zeus of the great love that must have inspired the Olympians to stay on Earth for so long; of the mutual respect that had existed between men and gods; how he, Zeus, had loved many earthly women and even become the father of men-gods like Hercules. Finally, I assured him that deep down in their subconscious, Earth men still regarded the Olympians with a love and respect that could never die, but was permanently imprinted on their souls. It would be a terrible crime indeed to break the eternal bond that existed between us. Far better instead to leave the solar system and seek a pleasing home elsewhere. The universe was large

the third eye of shiva

and the power of the Olympians almost infinite.

As I concluded, I saw that Zeus and Hermes (who had remained with us) were smiling and I intuitively knew that I had spoken well.

“Young man,” commenced Zeus, “you have spoken true. We have loved the race of men - and women - too much to make an end to them now. Instead, we will soon make our departure for a distant part of the universe known to us from our wide travels. We wish you and your race well. One day we will meet again. Return and tell your story.”

By some miracle of science or magic we suddenly found ourselves back inside our small capsule with the deserted Martian sands stretching out all around us. Silently, we went through all the necessary procedures for takeoff. Ten minutes later we were streaking through the Martian atmosphere towards our waiting mother ship.

I gave Red a sidelong look.

“We’ve got one hell of a story to tell when we get back home, but I have a strong feeling that no one is going to believe us.”

Red nodded his agreement.

“Better keep quiet, I’d say.”

Slowly, but decidedly, I shook my head.

“No. I don’t know about you, but I’m going to tell the truth. It’s important for people on Earth to know that we just outgrew our childhood.”

they travel by night

*T*he great Caravanserai from Yanbu to Madina stretched for at least half a mile across the baking Arabian sands.

It was the Hajj season and a cosmopolitan assortment of pilgrims were making their way towards the Holy city of Madina, the Prophet's resting place, prior to completing the last stage of their once-in-a-life-time trip to Makkah. The month in the Gregorian calendar was May, and all agreed that this May was hotter than was usual. Until today the pilgrims had traveled only by night, but time was getting short so the journey today had begun some hours before dusk in the hope that Madina could be reached by early the following morning. Camels and men grunted and sweated in the stifling heat.

Abdullah, the Persian Darwaysh, was luckier than most. He had hired two strong camels at Yanbu for twenty-five piastres and he and his hired help, the boy Muhammed from Makkah, were able to progress quite well. Others on mules or old camels were not so lucky and the party was glad enough when the time came for the dusk prayer and the camel train halted for religious duty and a few hours rest.

After prayers had been said, the boy Muhammed

began to boil up a pot of coffee. His client for the trip, Abdullah, the Darwaysh, was a strange kind of pilgrim. He spoke Arabic, Farsi and Hindi exceptionally well, but the boy couldn't help but feel that there was something odd about him. It was clear that he was a Shi'a heretic, but Muhammed sometimes had deep suspicions of the foreign stranger. He was lighter skinned than most Persians and Muhammed sometimes even entertained ideas that he could be a European infidel posing as a Muslim. However, he was circumcised as a good Muslim should be, and his knowledge of Islam was so great that fellow travelers frequently requested his help in resolving disputes about passages in the Qu'ran or Hadith.

The dispute began when Abdullah and the boy Muhammed decided to put an extra sack of rice on the back of their camel. Abdullah had bought the sack of rice at a ridiculously low price from one of his fellow travelers. The camel's owner, who was traveling with them, decided that it was literally 'the straw that would break the camel's back' and refused to allow the extra burden to be set on the animal. The argument that flared between the two men quickly reached a dangerous level.

"Kalb ibn kalb," ('dog son of a dog') snarled the old Bedouin. "The camel does not move from here with the extra burden of that sack on its back. It is my camel, and I will take it from you."

At these words, Abdullah the Darwaysh appeared to become incensed and he dealt the old Bedouin a mighty blow on the side of the head - the very sight and sound of which made the boy Muhammed cringe. For a moment the

the third eye of shiva

old man lay as if dead in the sand, but he eventually let out a great groan that showed he was at least still in the land of the living.

The boy Muhammed screamed.

“Master, you have done great wrong to treat the old one so. It is unlikely that he and his friends will let you live out the rest of this night. Now it has become a point of honor, and they must kill you.”

Abdullah, the Darwaysh, merely smiled.

“I think they will have little success, Muhammed. Let us leave this wretch to his whining and make ourselves some good food to eat.”

Abdullah and the boy Muhammed ate well that night and settled down to sleep for a few hours. It took only a moment for master and servant to fall into a deep slumber and soon Muhammed was dreaming about having a wife of his own. His sleep was suddenly broken by the sound of three loud explosions. He awoke to find Abdullah standing next to the crackling fire with a smoking pistol in his hand. In front of him lay three corpses - including that of the old Bedouin who had been insulted. Muhammed looked open-mouthed at the figure of his master, who stood totally still with a sneering smile on his face.

Muhammed was a simple boy, but he was sure that his master had done a great wrong. First he had struck the old man, and then he had compounded his sin by shooting the old man and his friends. Muhammed was young and had neither slept with a woman, nor killed a man. Now, however, he felt that Allah himself was importuning him to avenge the men that the stranger had killed.

Stealthily, the boy sneaked up behind the smiling Darwaysh, his own small dagger in his right hand. In spite of his cat-like tread, Abdullah seemed to sense the boy's presence and whirled around to confront him.

"Why, my dear Muhammed, would you seriously contemplate killing your own master?" asked the Darwaysh ironically. "Is that your idea of loyalty?"

The boy lunged at his erstwhile employer wildly, but Abdullah was far too quick for him and easily dodged the clumsy attack. In a moment he had the boy on the ground with his arm up behind his back. The boy screamed from the pain and a few men ran up and requested that Abdullah stop twisting Muhammed's arm. With a sneer he let go and moved a few steps back.

"It seems that I cannot trust anyone here," muttered Abdullah with a hard look at Muhammed, who was now scrambling onto his feet. The boy pointed his finger at the Darwaysh and appealed to the on-looking men.

"I am sure that this man is a heretic of some kind. I have even suspected him of being a heathen in disguise. Perhaps European."

There was a short silence while the men considered. Finally, a big, dark man uttered some words.

"Let us check to see if he is circumcised. If not, he must indeed be a heathen in disguise."

Muhammed shook his head violently.

"No, you are wrong about this. I have observed carefully and he is circumcised like a good Musulman."

"Nevertheless, we will double check," replied the man and they quickly wrestled Abdullah to the ground. For a

the third eye of shiva

few minutes, a careful inspection took place. Finally, the man spoke again.

“You are right. He is circumcised. However, the wound is still fresh and there are signs of suppuration. It seems to me that this circumcision has been performed within the last six to eight weeks. Possibly with the intention of deceiving us.”

The other men began to shout, but Abdullah the Darwaysh said nothing and had assumed an expressionless face.

“Kill him. Let his bones rot in the desert. He is certainly an Infidel,” came the cries from the men gathered around. Finally the dark man, who seemed to be their leader, raised his hand and they became silent and intent, listening.

“Yes, it is almost certain that he is an Infidel. But we cannot be one hundred per cent sure - only ninety per cent. In these circumstances, it would be wrong to kill him. Let him return alone to Yanbu. He shall have a camel and supplies of water and food. If he makes it, Allah wanted him spared. If not...”

The boy Muhammed stole a compassionate look at his erstwhile master.

“Do you have nothing to say in your defense?” he asked the Darwaysh.

Slowly, the man shook his head. Muhammed turned to the waiting men and spoke.

“Give us two camels and provisions for us both. This man, Infidel or Muslim, is my responsibility and I should see him safely back to Yanbu and onto the boat to Egypt.”

The dark man's face became troubled.

"In the silence of the desert he could murder you, Muhammed."

The boy looked at the expressionless man and smiled.

"I do not think so," he replied carefully, feeling the sharp edge of the wicked dagger in his pocket. "No, I do not think so."

the girl who saw too much

*A*manda was a beautiful young woman of sixteen, with flaming red hair and green eyes. In most respects, she was very normal, enjoying the usual pursuits of adolescents everywhere. She lived in a small village called Langley, in Berkshire - from which the frequent sleepy trains to London took about fifty minutes to arrive. Yes, Amanda was the same as all the other young people in Langley, except for one important difference: she could see into the future!

The first example of her prescience had come when she was just twelve years old. The American President, Ronald Cooper, had appeared live on the news to give his 'State of the Union' address. Suddenly Amanda had declared the following words:

"This poor man is about to die." A minute later, three shots rang out and the President had slumped to the ground from the podium - already dead.

Naturally, Amanda's mother and father had been amazed. How on earth had Amanda known what was going to happen to President Cooper? They had kept their daughter's startling prediction a careful secret, as they feared government prosecution if they revealed the

incident. Finally they rationalized the event as an amazing coincidence. At least, until the next time.

The second occasion that Amanda demonstrated her powers had been six months later. Her little brother, Joey, had been hospitalized for a minor ailment, tonsillitis, and after having his tonsils removed; he'd needed to remain in hospital overnight. Joey's parents had fretted anxiously over their son and at 11p.m. Amanda had uttered the following words:

"Oh Joey, please wait for us. Just hang on a little longer. We are coming to save you." After these dramatic words, Amanda had turned to her astonished parents and spoken excitedly.

"Oh please hurry! We have to go to the hospital. It's Joey. He's leaving us for good."

Remembering their daughter's earlier prescience, the frantic parents had immediately climbed into the family saloon and driven to the hospital - where, to their desolation, they found that Joey had passed away in his sleep twenty minutes earlier, the victim of a massive and totally unexpected heart attack.

Amanda's heartbroken parents had grieved over the unfortunate death of their son for many months, but they no longer doubted their daughter's strange ability to predict the future. Amanda had not shared in the grief of her parents through their period of mourning - she had never been very close to her little brother. On occasion, they thought her indifference to his sudden death quite unnatural.

The next incident had occurred two years later.

the third eye of shiva

Amanda was eighteen and studying for her A-levels. Her Mathematics teacher, Mr. Alan, had failed her dismally in her mock exam, and had even suggested that Amanda might do better to pull out of the A-level and spend more time studying for her other papers. That evening, Amanda informed her parents that Mr. Alan had been looking very pale when he'd spoken to her that day - and she had experienced a strange feeling that she would never see him again. At these words, her father's eyes had narrowed suspiciously and her mother had involuntarily shrunk back from her daughter in something approaching fear.

Of course it all turned out exactly as Amanda had predicted. Mr. Alan was absent from school the following day, and two weeks later they received the sobering news that he had died from contracting a virulent, but very rare virus.

After Mr. Alan's death, Amanda's relationship with her parents was never quite the same. They seemed to be afraid of their own daughter. What would she think of next? Was it possible that she'd predict their demise?

The final act began when Amanda's father bought a gun. There had been several recent burglaries in Langley and he told his wife and daughter that he'd purchased the weapon in case of outside intruders. His daughter, however, had looked at him sadly, and said:

"Father, you fear me and have bought this weapon for protection from a harmless girl, your own daughter! On some pretext, it is your intention to shoot me dead. Well... it will all be over this night."

The police arrived at 16 Langfield Avenue at nine o'

clock the next morning. They had responded to the desperate call of Amanda, who'd discovered her parents dead in their bed, with the newly purchased gun lying like some suggestive line of demarcation between their naked bodies. Apparently, Amanda's father had shot his wife in the head and then turned the weapon on himself.